INTRODUCTION TO THE GENERAL POLICY DEBATE
AND REPORT BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD
ON ITS OWN ACTIVITIES IN 1996-1997

Address by

His Excellency Mr Nouréni Tidjani-Serpos

Chairperson of the Executive Board
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

Paris, 22 October 1997
Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr Director-General,
Distinguished Delegates,
Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with a feeling of great humility that I open the general policy debate of the twenty-ninth session of the General Conference with my report on the activities of the Executive Board, which I have had the signal honour to preside during the biennium that is now ending. The Organization has progressed along the complex road of reform, trying to identify, in a difficult economic context, the most appropriate means of fostering change. We are also aware that the other agencies of the United Nations system have also been seeking renewal. It is clear that we are all approaching a crossroads at which choices will have to be made and innovative and courageous decisions taken.

Against the background of the challenge of reforms already introduced or about to be introduced, my report will give a brief account of the experience of the Executive Board which will, I hope, assist in progress towards an increasingly effective and convincing Executive Board at one with itself and transparent in its collective consciousness.

I am convinced of the importance and necessity of reflection on the activities of this governing body since, by clarifying the purpose and the course of its action, the Board will be able to help the Organization to do greater honour to its calling and to face up to the problems that today and tomorrow hold in store for it, in an internal context of change and against an uncertain background internationally.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In her report to the twenty-seventh session of the General Conference, the then Chairperson of the Executive Board Ms Bernard-Meunier expressed her satisfaction that over the two years of her tenure of office all the basic texts had been prepared for the transition to the new system of representation on the Executive Board, characterized by the election not of individuals acting in their own names but of Member States.

By virtue of an amendment to UNESCO’s Constitution, the twenty-seventh session of the General Conference had, for the first time in the history of the Organization, elected Member States to the Executive Board, which then designated their representatives; this was the consequence of the adoption of 26 C/Resolution 19.3, which required a change in the status of members of the Board. As a result of these elections half of the Executive Board chaired by Ms Attiya Inayatullah was composed of independent individuals and half of representatives of Member States.

Critical voices were then raised, expressing fears that this change would diminish intellectual input and dry up the enthusiasm and creative urges that should inspire our work. Others also feared that the Board would become too impersonal, a sounding box for distant
voices and interests that would be less inclined to concern themselves with the needs and ideals of the Organization.

I am the first Chairperson to have experienced the full effect of the new structure of the Executive Board, now wholly composed of representatives of Member States. An important step had thus been taken.

Now that the experience of this totally 'political' biennium is drawing to an end we are in a position to draw up a first balance sheet of events since the 149th session. We have seen not only the direct and foreseeable effects of the political transformation of the Board but also its indirect and less foreseeable consequences.

I believe that one of the things of which we can be certain is that the discussion has lost nothing of its vigour or flavour. On the contrary, a variety of individual arguments have been put forward with great frankness, tolerance and concern to reach consensus.

But we must recognize a profound change in the Board’s approach to its work. Owing to its direct responsibility to governments, the Board has made greater, more specific, and more pressing demands of the Secretariat.

The Executive Board’s desire to assert its prerogatives to the full vis-à-vis the Secretariat has thus been a constant and growing feature of the sessions that I have had the honour to chair. The documents requested by the Executive Board from the Secretariat have shown a marked improvement and are geared to the Board’s special tasks; more and more, they have come to furnish facts on which to base policy choices, rather than merely technical analyses linked to the actual performance of the Secretariat’s duties, while the documents vary in kind depending on whether the aim is to implement a decision in practical terms, or, on the contrary, to give direction to an action and choose among several possible courses of action. And here, I must pay solemn tribute to Mr Federico Mayor, our Director-General.

For here is a man of vision, a great humanist who truly believes in intellectual co-operation and who, for eight years, had grown accustomed to working with a Board with a different structure. Suddenly, he and his Secretariat were faced with a new type of governing body; they had to cope with an awkward transition period, to adapt to new demands and new approaches. The Organization is a complex machine and some of its parts, used to a certain routine, creaked and faltered as they strove to understand the direction in which the new wind of the reforms demanded by the Executive Board was blowing. The Director-General therefore had to fight on several fronts: first, to require his staff members to fall into line and faithfully put the will of the States Members of the Executive Board into practice; second, to attempt also to explain to the Executive Board, which had then become the political governing body, that the staff members needed a little time to adapt to the new situation, and that to transform the 50-year old habits of a technocracy as large and as unwieldy as UNESCO would take a little time and patience.

As Chairperson of the Executive Board, I wish to inform the General Conference that the Director-General has co-operated fully with us. He has helped us to monitor programme implementation and to gain a better grasp of matters concerning the realization of the ideals and of the broad policies of the Organization. It has been his wish that our Organization should always be ahead of its time. In his view, Utopia does not imply fantasy. It implies finding out which criteria must be met to make the impossible a palpable reality, so that those without a voice may have the right to speak. He had, on occasion, the mistaken impression that the
Board was a conservative body that was troubled by any small innovation that he wished to introduce.

To prove the contrary to him and show him that we were partners in progress, we established an Intellectual Forum within the Executive Board. The reason was that, parallel to the intellectual role played by the Director-General, the Executive Board also considered that its role should not be merely managerial, but that it should also be a body for intellectual creation and reflection. And so, at each session, we have held in-depth discussions on crucial issues such as the information highways and new technologies, youth and UNESCO’s ideals, the plan of action for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and new initiatives in science. This intellectual forum, which dovetails with the tasks of administrative and financial monitoring, is not only an effective means of studying in greater depth and interconnecting certain aspects of issues which are still not clear on the mental horizon of the men and women of our time, but also, and above all, a means of jointly bringing to birth the ideas that will give direction to our future. By adopting the role of an intellectual forum at each session, we are helping to show that, before they emerge, new ideas must first be couched in old terms; they must combat old ideas and supplant the latter on the ideological horizon of our time. Before appearing in their new shape, before the conditions governing their potential have been determined, new ideas must clash with old attitudes of mind. All these are epistemological obstacles that the Executive Board, meeting as an intellectual community, attempts to overcome. Together with the Director-General, the Executive Board is turning to the new and the positive in the think tank that it represents; but while underscoring the intellectual character of our Organization’s mission of intellectual co-operation, I wish to stress that we have done everything to keep reflection and action properly in balance, because study and research activities and practical activities are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

While cultivating our relations with the Secretariat, the Executive Board has been particularly careful to maintain very close ties with the General Conference through its President, Mr Torben Krogh, *ex officio* Member of the Board and Chairperson of the ad hoc Working Group that you established to examine the structure and function of the General Conference. This interpersonal link with Mr Krogh, his regular progress reports to the Board, and the informal meetings that Mr Krogh and I have held with the Director-General, have made it possible to avoid many crises and pointless disputes and to organize the work of the General Conference and of its commissions and committees harmoniously. In document 29 C/27 Addendum 2, the Executive Board expressed to Mr Torben Krogh its satisfaction with the quality of the work accomplished by the members of the Working Group. It is clear that the Board was fortunate to have Mr Krogh at its side. His legendary pipe, like that of Georges Brassens, each puff representing a positive idea taking shape, his loyalty to the Organization and its ideals, and his sense of tolerance and receptiveness to others, are qualities that have enabled the three governing bodies to function more effectively while safeguarding the prerogatives of each.

Another aspect of the activities of the Executive Board is the expansion of the role of the Bureau. The Bureau, whose task is to assist the Chairperson, has met much more frequently; in addition to identifying agenda items concerning which the Board could adopt decisions without debate, the Vice-Chairpersons representing the regional groups have been given a bigger part to play, becoming efficient transmission mechanisms whereby Member States can obtain clear, precise information as and when required.
The plenary Commissions and Committees of the Board got through an enormous amount of work in a minimum of time. The reduction of more than 40 days in the length of Executive Board sessions since the 1990-1991 biennium, combined with the fact that the number of Members of the Board, their speaking time and their participation have increased significantly, poses serious problems for the smooth running of the Board. The work expected of the Executive Board both by the Member States and by the Secretariat cannot be forthcoming unless the Executive Board and its subsidiary bodies themselves show awareness of their primordially policy-making role and unless the material and financial resources needed for them to carry out their functions properly are made available to them. The Commissions and Committees should be allowed the time for a genuine exchange of views; they should discuss matters in detail in order to arrive at precise directives enabling the plenary to reach decisions more quickly, thus providing the Secretariat with a useful tool for carrying out the wishes of the Member States.

I should like to draw the attention of the General Conference to the fact that many Member States have only their representative and his or her alternate, so that, when several Commissions, Committees and Working Groups meet simultaneously, we are in practice preventing the representatives of the underprivileged countries from participating fully in the policy debate in progress.

I must admit that I am partly to blame; the stringent management of the Board’s budget and its concern to set an example as regards the savings advocated by the Board itself have meant that not all of the budget allocated to the Board has been spent. The next Chairperson should see to it that the budget of the next biennium is used in such a way as to provide the small delegations with the means to be able to attend all the sessions of the Board and its subsidiary bodies.

Some people believe that the reforms I am suggesting should be entrusted to a group of experts charged with examining the working methods of the Executive Board. The Board has its own subsidiary body, the Special Committee, and this process of internal reform is very much in line with its mandate. I do not go along with the idea of ignoring an internal body capable of doing the work and calling in a group of experts to deal with the Executive Board. A time when Member States are experiencing serious financial constraints is not the time to siphon off funds intended for the programme to bring together regularly throughout a biennium experts who will do the job no better than the members of the Special Committee.

The proof of this is that the Executive Board has already investigated itself and its working methods. Self-criticism and internal reform are, by definition, much more difficult than the changes we recommend others to make. I am therefore particularly proud to be able to say that the work of reform the Executive Board has carried out under my co-ordination has been very substantial. We have made amendments or given approval to a great many quite significant matters relating to norms, statutes and regulations. At its 149th and 150th sessions, for instance, the Executive Board decided, in particular, to amend part of its Rules of Procedure. This work of reform should be continued internally.

I should also like to suggest that, at its next session, the Board should reconsider the distribution of agenda items between the Commissions and Committees of the Board, so as to reduce the workload of the Programme and External Relations Commission. It might be a good idea to detach external relations from this Commission and add them to the functions of what is now the Special Committee, which could thus become a plenary commission. With respect to the Committee on International Non-Governmental Organizations, it is essential that
it be revitalized and that the presence of Member States give it renewed energy. The Executive Board is acutely aware of the efficient fabric the NGOs represent. They are our Organization’s very special partners, and it is important that the Committee that deals with them be strengthened.

In making all these suggestions for reform, I am not in any way saying that the Chairpersons and members of these subsidiary bodies have not got through a colossal amount of work, and I should like to pay a well-deserved tribute to them here. Before the suspension of the 152nd session, I thanked all the Chairpersons of Commissions and Committees, but because of the late hour and because some Members were afraid I would make them miss their planes, I inadvertently omitted to thank Mr Pal Pataki, Chairperson of Commission PX. He worked like a Trojan, was attentive to people’s opinions and showed himself to be a man of consensus, and his capacity for work amazed many people. I hope my friend Pataki is not too angry with me for this regrettable and accidental omission.

Another matter which may properly be raised here is that of the role of the Chairperson, in particular between sessions. If we see the Board as playing what I would term a ‘high-powered’ role, and if therefore we wish it to be able fully to perform the functions for which it was set up, it is essential that we enable it to operate as a standing body, one that is active 12 months a year. In the light of experience I feel that it is important that the Chairperson should reside in the city in which the Organization’s Headquarters are located, or that he or she be able to go there as often as possible, in order to keep more in touch with institutional partners (ambassadors, distinguished visitors) and with the many and various organizations and associations which have their headquarters in UNESCO House. I am convinced that such permanent contact would enable the Board to function more effectively both between and during sessions, above all if the resident Chairperson is also able to make timely visits to the Member States, wherever necessary, in order not to lose sight of the Organization’s activities as a whole.

It was this concern of the Chairperson of the Board to remain constantly in touch that enabled us to identify a key problem which the next Executive Board should monitor closely, in order to put forward useful suggestions to the General Conference at its thirtieth session.

For the definition of regions with a view to the execution by the Organization of regional activities is virtually a legacy of the Cold War. The membership of these regional groups has not been brought up to date since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Executive Board has become aware of a certain restlessness in the regional groups at the moment. I would suggest that an informal process of reflection should be initiated on this question, for it is already beginning to create problems for the smooth functioning of the Board’s Bureau. Group II regards itself in fact as a purely electoral group, having no role to play as regards the programme. However, all the Chairperson’s correspondence, including that which concerns the programme, must be transmitted via the Vice-Chairpersons. If one group declines to take any action on the programme, the process comes to a standstill. Moreover, several groups have already notified me of their intention to require that the number of their seats on the Executive Board correspond to the ratio of one seat for every three States provided for in the texts. I rely on the next Board to negotiate these changes of direction, which call for a consensual approach, smoothly and diplomatically.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the past two years the Board has taken a large number of major decisions. The abandonment of the concept of a fixed plan, which was obsolete in several respects, does not of course mean that the Secretariat is henceforth able to improvise in an arbitrary way how the budget allocated for each biennium is to be utilized. The Medium-Term Strategy makes it possible, while allowing the Secretariat a broad range of tactical options, to define in an open and dynamic way, and at the same time clearly, the limits and main lines of our action.

That is why the Board has, quite properly, devoted most of its working time, in particular since the 150th session, on the one hand to the implementation of the programme as drawn up by the General Conference at its last session and, on the other, to the preparation of document 29 C/5.

During this financial period, we derived perfectly clear guidance from the Organization’s ideals and from our Constitution. Despite the range of our action, our spheres of competence showed themselves once again to have been clearly defined by our founding fathers.

With regard to education, our thinking was sustained by the deliberations of the Delors Commission, and our efforts were geared equally to basic and to higher education. In its discussions and decisions the Executive Board had to respond on the one hand to the obligation to step up efforts to co-ordinate the different education systems in the world and on the other to the need to come to the assistance of those facing particularly serious and urgent problems.

During this biennium, we also monitored closely the situation of educational and cultural institutions in the occupied Arab territories, in application of 147 EX/Decision 3.4.5. As a result of the dramatic situation in the region, this issue was the subject, at each of the Board’s sessions, of a finely balanced consensus secured thanks to the goodwill of all. The same is true of other trouble spots in the world.

The fifth International Conference on Adult Education held in Hamburg was a major landmark for UNESCO. The vast literacy campaigns carried out in the nine high-population countries, and the particular attention paid by the Executive Board to the implementation of the programme on Lifelong Education for All, clearly demonstrate that, for us, education is and remains the top priority. It is the Organization’s flagship.

In regard to culture, the most significant event of this biennium has been the publication of the Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development.

As I said when it was first published, the Report is a tool for reflection and basic action, following the Copernican revolution brought about by the recognition of the relationship between culture and development. I therefore thought that it was entirely appropriate to devote some time to this item, and, indeed, the reflection on the Report, as well as the ways and means of ensuring its follow-up, were the subjects of discussions and decisions by the Board during its 149th, 150th and 151st sessions. Another point which is somewhat related concerns UNESCO’s participation in the Stockholm Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development which we considered at the 150th session of the Board.

Still in the area of culture, I should like to tell you that we devoted long discussions to Jerusalem and the implementation of 147 EX/Decision 3.6.1 in all the sessions which I was honoured to chair. Given this subject’s inherent difficulty, I believe that the way in which the
discussion was conducted testifies to the goodwill and constructive spirit shown by each Member of this Board. I should like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues, once again, for having been kind enough to listen to my appeals for an open-minded dialogue aimed at solving disagreements by a consensual approach. The Director-General drew our attention to other theatres of war around the world in which heritage was in danger. The Board unfailingly reacted in a positive way.

We now come to the sciences. In this area, I should like to recall that the priority or special theme of the 149th session was precisely that of new initiatives in science. The discussion on this subject was particularly productive and interesting. Important decisions were made at the end of the debate which lent renewed vigour to the Organization’s action in regard to international co-operation and the search for innovative approaches in the field of science. The entire Executive Board gave its full support to the World Solar Summit which was held in Harare.

Scientific research is also one of our main concerns, as is clearly shown inter alia by the debate concerning the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) and the opening by the Secretariat of a Special Account for the functioning of the International Centre for Theoretical Physics, of which the Board took note at its 150th session.

In regard to the human and social sciences, the Executive Board expressed its support for effective measures in the fight which we are conducting in order to eliminate poverty.

In the context of our ethical mission, a great deal of analytical effort was devoted to tolerance, the culture of maintenance, ethics, the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, and the Declaration on the Human Genome.

Regarding the Priority Africa Department, the Board takes the view that it should, in addition to its co-ordinating role, be given some programmes to manage, which would make it easier to evaluate its work at a later stage.

These are less familiar themes, but they are closely related to the Organization’s fields of competence and must continue to be addressed and carried forward if we wish to adapt to the emergencies that face today’s world and the new questions arising therein.

Administrative and financial matters have always been central to our concerns. A difficult budgetary situation has shown up certain points as being much less purely technical than was supposed, and certain questions have sparked off deep and passionate debates, verging indeed on the dramatic; but each time that we have reached the edge of the precipice, good sense has prevailed.

In view of the economic situation and the challenges that our Organization must confront, it is not surprising that differences should arise, and one does one’s best to respond rapidly to emergencies. A balance must be struck between necessities and our determination to accomplish our mission, for financial arguments can never replace a human approach.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Visits are not merely matters of protocol. The cultural events held during sessions of the Executive Board are not just social occasions, but in fact confirm and consolidate UNESCO’s role and status within the major forces and institutions engaged worldwide in the struggle to
secure a future for everyone. Such events are thus part and parcel of the life of the Executive Board, on a par with its debates and decisions.

The most important event of the 149th session was the visit by the President of Uzbekistan, Mr Islam Karimov. We were particularly honoured by his visit since Mr Karimov was one of those chiefly responsible for the Republic of Uzbekistan joining UNESCO in 1993.

The 150th session was marked by many events. I should like to mention first of all the imposing celebration marking the 90th birthday of Léopold Sédar Senghor, which was organized by the Secretariat efficiently and con brio. For all present, this memorable occasion was not only a moment of happiness linked to the person and personality of Mr Senghor but also a historic opportunity to bring into focus the Organization’s ideals of fellowship and humanity. More recently, the Board also joined in the tribute to the great educator Paolo Freire and the great West Indian poet Aimé Césare. Aimé Césare was also the subject of a very fine exhibition and of a symposium which revealed the universal dimension of the man.

We also had the honour at the 150th session, when the priority theme was the information highways, to welcome the President of the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel français, Mr Hervé Bourges, and the Co-ordinator of the Pan-African News Agency (PANA), Mr Babacar Fall. We also witnessed, during the discussion, an impressive demonstration, organized by the Secretariat, on the use of the Internet.

During the 151st session we also celebrated the centenary of the birth of Jean Piaget, the great Swiss pedagogue and epistemologist who was himself a Member of the Executive Board, and a commemorative exhibition was organized here at UNESCO. Also at Headquarters, the World Heritage Centre organized another very attractive exhibition, in particular on Africa.

I shall never forget the tent erected by UNICEF and the Red Cross in the foyer to Room X. It was covered with hundreds of photographs of Rwandan children looking for their families.

The Board’s 151st session was memorable in particular for the announcement of the decision of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to return to the Organization. This immediately had an invigorating effect, reviving hopes and bolstering morale at UNESCO. Universality is now within our reach, and it is not too unrealistic to hope that in the near future it will be achieved.

At its 151st session the Board was also honoured to receive the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, a most impressive personality who spoke at the Board’s plenary session on 29 May 1997.

At the 152nd session we had the great honour of receiving His Excellency Mr Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon, President of the United States of Mexico. His support for UNESCO’s ideals gave new courage to us all.

I should not forget to mention that during the 152nd session we were able to visit an exhibition devoted to the rehabilitation of the historic centres of Havana and the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, and to attend a concert of ancient and modern Lithuanian music.
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I should have liked to thank everyone who helped the Board in its work individually but it would take too long. I should like, however, to pay tribute to the representatives of Members of the Executive Board for their generosity and devotion. I am indebted to them all not only for their collaboration but for the friendly discussions I have had with them and the way they all helped me out in difficult situations.

This report, which is now reaching its conclusion, marks the end of one period in my life and the beginning of another. I remember accepting the responsibility you conferred upon me two years ago as if it were yesterday. Time, that ‘invisible cascade of centuries’ as Antoine-Léonard Thomas puts it, is a truly impenetrable mystery.

Thank you.