

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the celebration of the centenary of the birth of
Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra of Thailand

Your Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn,
Your Excellency the Ambassador of Thailand,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for UNESCO to commemorate the centenary of the birth of Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra, the Princess Mother. She will long remain an emblematic figure of her country and a reference for people everywhere.

I visited Thailand last January for the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Education for All. On that occasion, I had the honour of being received by His Majesty King Bhumidol Adulyadej. He personally thanked UNESCO for the inscription of this day on our calendar of anniversaries and told me how much this means to his country. It also means a lot to UNESCO, firstly, because of the immense standing of the Princess Mother - and in a moment I will devote my address to her extraordinary life's work - but also because of the close and lasting ties which UNESCO has enjoyed with Thailand for over half a century.

For 40 years, UNESCO's Bangkok office has placed our Organization in a dynamic and enabling environment which has been a constant support to our work throughout the region. Thailand will be a precious partner in the follow-up to last month's World Education Forum in Dakar - as it has already been in the follow-up to the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education. Yet Thailand is not only a strong educational partner of UNESCO, it is exemplary in the conservation of some of the most remarkable sites inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Indeed, I feel that Thailand and UNESCO celebrate this centenary as one family.

UNESCO's Constitution emphasises that the main foundation of lasting peace is the "intellectual and moral solidarity" of humankind. This term - intellectual and moral solidarity - perfectly describes the life's work of the Princess Mother. It explains why her legacy means so much, not only to her own people, but to all the peoples of the world and to UNESCO. This centenary celebrates a truly exemplary life - one that spanned the last century and offers us a shining example of the values that our world needs to meet the challenges of the new century.

The Princess Mother's outstanding achievements could fill volumes. I cannot hope to give a complete picture of the scope and depth of her undertakings so I shall try to summarise her lasting impact in just two major areas where she was ahead of her time. In fact, she was also ahead of UNESCO!

Long before UNESCO's MOST programme on the Management of Social Transformations, the Princess Mother launched a multidisciplinary development plan for the mountainous region of northern Thailand.

The Doi Tung Development Project concerns an area, home to numerous different ethnic groups, that used to be plagued by deforestation, rapid population growth, poverty, drugs, illiteracy and lack of opportunities. Now, only 12 years after its inception, the positive impact of the project is visible. Deforested areas are being reclaimed. Agro-forestry has replaced opium growing. Opium addicts have been rehabilitated. Improved hygiene contributes to better health. Training offers ethnic minorities new job opportunities. Improved infrastructure brings amenities, tourism, jobs and a rising standard of living. This integrated approach to rural development is a model of its kind and collaborating agencies have taken good note.

My second example - again, because of its relevance to UNESCO - concerns education. Four decades ago, children in remote parts of Thailand had little access to education apart from the makeshift schools for the disadvantaged, managed by various Border Patrol Police units. The Princess Mother took these under her patronage and provided funds to build and equip proper schools. With funds from donors, hundreds more schools were built. The initiative was rewarded in 1989 with an Honourable Mention by the UNESCO International Literacy Prize Jury. The Princess Mother also initiated functional literacy and skills training programmes for out-of-school hilltribe youth. This grew into the Training and Development Project for Youth in Remote Areas. Going beyond literacy, it includes ethics and values education.

If time permitted, I could speak of many more initiatives, like, for example, the role of the Princess Mother in promoting and thereby preserving, tribal arts and crafts or the great effectiveness of her Medical Volunteer Foundation. In all these ways and more, the Princess Mother showed the world how individuals can contribute to development. She showed us that the way to reach our goals is by starting small, with determination and commitment.

On behalf of UNESCO, may I conclude by reiterating how honoured we are to commemorate the centenary of the birth of Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra, the Princess Mother. It is now a great pleasure for me to invite Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to open the exhibition marking this centenary.