

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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at the international symposium
“Reforming the United Nations to give peace a chance”
on the subject:
“The new faces of war and the causes of the features of contemporary
conflicts – An analysis of the risks and dangers of war in today’s world”

Paris, 31 January 2001

Mr Speaker of the National Assembly,
Chairpersons of the Commissions,
Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The title of this symposium, “Reforming the United Nations to give peace a chance”, gives me great satisfaction. After more than a year at the head of UNESCO, I now realize how vital is the work we perform in our various fields of competence – education, science, culture and communication – for bringing about a genuine peace, rooted in the minds of men, as the Organization’s Constitution has it.

I agree with previous speakers that any attempt to define the new faces of war and to understand its causes must go hand in hand with an attempt to reflect upon the new faces of peace. Clearly, when the cold war came to an end, the States that were party to it felt that a new era of security was beginning. Yet an impressive number of conflicts, most of them civil wars and some of them culminating in genocide, continued and continue to be waged within States, striking at the very heart of their cohesion and very often endangering their future for many years to come.

Nonetheless, attempts are also being made every day to build peace, through agreements, processes of national reconciliation or the often laborious quest for truth and justice.

UNESCO seeks a clearer understanding of the obstacles and forces which have still to be overcome by means of international cooperation. Its action takes effect in the medium and long term. It does of course endeavour – within the limits of its resources – to relieve the victims when tragedy could not be avoided, by rebuilding and consolidating peace wherever it remains fragile. But it is obvious that its principal and crucial task is that of prevention. The main thrust of its work is to promote – through education, science, culture and communication – respect for human rights and hence to nourish the taproot of peace.

Ignorance and poverty are evils that affect every latitude and invariably bear within them the seeds of deadly violence.

We must face the facts: booming trade and economic growth essentially benefit the richest, and the gap between them and the poorest grows wider every day. This does not only involve inequality in incomes but also inequality in access to knowledge and markets, made worse in very many countries by unsustainable debt and extreme poverty.

Environmental degradation, the digital divide, social faultlines and discrimination, especially against women, or the devastating effects of pandemics such as AIDS, all hit the most vulnerable populations head-on and can have enormous social and economic costs in the short, medium and long term. Their combined effect on those least able to defend themselves is overwhelming and States are all too often helpless when faced with such great needs.

This is where the international community must intervene, to exercise its preventive function. Reducing poverty, offering all of the 880 million illiterate adults throughout the world and the 110 million children denied access to schooling a high-quality basic education,

enabling them to acquire the minimum knowledge and skills that they need, are part of UNESCO's daily tasks. The undertakings made at Dakar offer some encouragement in this respect. But we must realize that nothing short of a political leap forward is called for. We cannot expect the private sector to do everything even though it has an important role to play; official development assistance, which is steadily declining, should be substantially increased.

Two days ago I was in Davos, invited to take part in a meeting on the Dot.Force created by the G-8 which, as you know, is setting about the task of proposing solutions for narrowing the digital divide. The same questions keep cropping up: access to information for all, cultural diversity and access to drinking water. Will world unity, for which the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are intended to be the bedrock, be strengthened in the wake of economic and financial globalization and by the ever faster transborder flows of investment and information? Will ever closer economic and financial interdependence alone create solid bonds between peoples, encourage dialogue among cultures and civilizations and strengthen knowledge-sharing?

By now it is clear that, unless we redouble our efforts, we run the risk of witnessing even more serious social fragmentation and, in the short term, of allowing the most deeply rooted links holding society together to break apart.

The scale of the challenge is immense and can only be taken up by the international community as a whole – by which I mean, of course, international organizations and States but also civil society in the broad sense, the individuals comprising it, the organizations representing it and the private sector.

International, national and individual action cannot therefore be treated separately. An effort should be made to give citizens a better understanding of the role played by the country to which they belong and the deep meaning of its action on a regional and international scale. Awareness of individual and collective responsibilities needs to be encouraged. Education – especially the teaching of history and human rights and civics – lies at the heart of this awareness-raising exercise.

It is to that very exercise that UNESCO is tirelessly devoted. The consideration recently given under its auspices, in conjunction with 11 States of South-East Europe, to the interlinkage of cultures and the effort to eliminate stereotypes from the subregion's history books, or the project on education for citizenship that the Organization has just drawn up with the French Government, are two specific examples of its efforts to build a civil conscience.

Having been the lead agency for the celebration of the International Year for the Culture of Peace in the year 2000, UNESCO has just been given another important responsibility: that of being lead agency for the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, beginning in the year 2001. It so happens that 2001 has also been proclaimed United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. The United Nations system as a whole shares the heartfelt belief that the defences of peace must be constructed in the minds of men. UNESCO will spare no effort to pursue its preventive mission, one of its greatest but also most thankless tasks, so abundant is the evidence that a great deal still remains to be done. The human mind is first and foremost the seat of freedom and conscience. It is our joint responsibility, acting together, to give the human mind a chance.