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Address by  
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President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

at the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO

Paris, 15 October 2001

Madam President,  
President Chirac,  
Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to be here today at this opening of the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO. I bring to you the good wishes of the Government and the entire people of Nigeria. I warmly welcome my good friend and colleague, President Chirac, to this very important international meeting. I thank him for being a friend and a companion.

Let me say that I am particularly happy to be back at UNESCO, an organization with whose mission and principles I have had long association and commitment. As far back as 1976, as Head of State, I worked closely with UNESCO to develop Nigeria's Universal Primary Education (UPE). I have also had the honour of serving as a member of the jury of distinguished prizes of UNESCO. Since the transition to democratic governance in Nigeria, our Administration has been fruitfully cooperating with UNESCO in many key areas. And I want to salute Director-General Matsuura for this accomplishment.

Madam President, it is not possible to over-emphasize UNESCO's significance and relevance in crucial areas of concern, not only to Nigeria, but to other developing countries and indeed to the world at large. As the current Chairman of the South Summit (since the G-77 Summit in Havana last year), I want to underline the confidence and trust, as well as the expectation, which the developing countries place in UNESCO.

By circumstance of terror and cruelty, we meet at a crucial juncture in world development and politics. The heinous events of 11 September in the United States of America have stunned the world and curtailed many international activities. Thus, this General Conference offers a most welcome forum to reflect on the implications of an entirely new dimension of terrorism and the threat to world peace based on shared global values, conventions and collective security. There is an urgent need to revisit and strengthen the global system of interaction and cooperation if organizations of the United Nations system, such as UNESCO, are to live up to their potential and people's expectations. Let us reassess and reaffirm at this Conference the future of international cooperation, which incidentally is one of the principal objectives inscribed in the Constitution of UNESCO.

Although Africa is the weakest region of the world, I want to emphasize that all countries must be involved in the search for answers and in the shaping of the new structure of the international system that may evolve. We witness that UNESCO's agenda has suddenly become part of the agenda of the highest political order in the world. We therefore have an obligation to endow our Organization with the inspiration and resources it needs to contribute to the global soul-searching and action in the wake of recent events, and to carry out any new or reinforced roles thrust upon it. This demands new efforts to focus and sharpen even more the effectiveness of its actions – actions which it must undertake more and more in concert with other relevant elements of the international community. This is a challenge to us all, the Member States. After all, we are UNESCO. Let us articulate the vision, mission, policies, strategies, programmes and activities of the Organization, and also provide adequate means

and support for their implementation. The time seems right for us to solemnly rededicate ourselves to the noble objectives of UNESCO's Constitution, articulating our determination to proceed, through international cooperation, on the path of peace, development, tolerance and dialogue. In other words, we must strengthen UNESCO for future contributions in a changed world environment.

Indeed, UNESCO's mandate remains at the very heart of the world's basic needs for survival, which include the need for knowledge-sharing, to uphold diversity, for dignity, tolerance, pluralism and democratic principles – especially in the context of globalization. The creation of UNESCO, itself the result of a tremendous act of faith, is premised on *defending* peace in the minds of the people, *terminating* the evils of war, hatred, and inequalities and unfairness, and *halting* all oppression, be it of man by man, or of nation by nation. The global village will not owe its existence solely to scientific, technological and economic advances. It will survive only if its development processes incorporate the educational with the cultural, the social with the spiritual, and the religious and ethical with the traditional. These are the true indices of the intellectual content of the emerging new world, if that world is to be peaceful and harmonious.

Prejudice against other cultures and civilizations is a major impediment to true globalization. Dialogue begins at home. A democratic dispensation and a spirit of good governance afford us the opportunity for dialogue, debate and deliberation together, for peaceful solutions rather than bitterness, confrontation and violence. Nigeria, for one, looks to UNESCO to serve as a steady forum where nations of the world can reaffirm their commitment to peaceful ways of conduct, to a redoubling of their efforts of tolerance, and to giving practical meaning to the much wanted – and much needed – concept of dialogue among cultures, civilizations and religions. At the recent World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance, held in Durban, my message emphasized the absolute need for all of us to commit ourselves to opposing all forms of discrimination wherever they may occur. Unfortunately, this seminal event was overshadowed by discord and political disputes. We seemed to have lost an opportunity to face the real challenges of changing the prejudices, biases and discrimination which had formed the bedrock of human inhumanity to man.

These are the challenges set out in the Constitution of UNESCO by the visionary founders of the Organization. We owe these founders more than gratitude for their vision, thoughts and ambition for the good of humankind. The challenge now rests with us to translate their ambition into reality, 55 years after the foundation of the Organization, and in the process make UNESCO's role on the world scene not only dynamic and constructive, but also viable and respectable.

Without universality UNESCO's voice will be impaired and its role will be hampered. Given the importance of UNESCO's agenda – and let us not forget that the Constitution was co-drafted by an eminent American, Archibald MacLeish – we cannot rest until universality of membership is restored. I commend the United States Congress for having initiated the process of returning to UNESCO. We hope that the next few weeks will bring a fruitful conclusion to these welcome moves. Likewise, I hope that Singapore will also reclaim her rightful place in this world body.

It is imperative that UNESCO be provided with adequate resources, especially at this crucial moment. Nigeria observes with concern the consequences of the zero nominal growth budget for UNESCO, the third such budget in a row. Care must be taken to ensure that such a

policy does not become tantamount to a creeping reduction in the real value of the budget, thus emasculating the core capacities of the Organization. I therefore appeal to our fellow member countries, especially the industrialized nations, to help to change this rather counter-productive budgetary policy. We observe with satisfaction that the Director-General has been putting in place reform measures aimed at enabling the Organization to better serve the needs and aspirations of member countries. I salute the Director-General for his leadership and courage, and for his demonstrated willingness to work assiduously with Member States in all stages, and on all issues involved.

Madam President, on 14 November 1960, less than two months after attaining national sovereignty, Nigeria became the fifty-eighth Member State of UNESCO. Even as a young nation, we saw a ready partner in this agency of the United Nations system, created for the advancement of international peace and the common welfare of humankind through the educational, scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world. Nigerians acknowledge with particular appreciation UNESCO's support during the recent tragic episode of bad leadership and governance in our country. The constant call by this Organization for the respect of human rights, human dignity and the rule of law, was a source of encouragement to many Nigerians. Nigeria is happy about the renewed and reinvigorated cooperation with UNESCO. In particular, we deeply appreciate the unanimous decision, taken at the 30th session of the General Conference in November 1999, approving the resolution on cooperation with Nigeria, which requested the Director-General to take all appropriate measures to increase cooperation with Nigeria in the framework of implementation of the programme and through the mobilization of extrabudgetary resources. I also acknowledge with deep appreciation the financial support provided by the Government of Japan towards the implementation of this programme. We are indeed very encouraged by the evolution of our cooperation, and we look forward to strengthening it appropriately in the context of our national requirements and contribution to international cooperation, especially as regards basic education, education sector analysis, technical and vocational education, science policy, and the creation of a virtual library for institutions of higher education.

One of the most constant manifestations of underdevelopment is poverty and ignorance. If we, or any developing nation for that matter, are to succeed, we must put poverty behind us. In this regard, we feel reassured that UNESCO has chosen the theme of poverty eradication – extreme poverty in particular – as one of two cross-cutting themes to be pursued by the entire Organization for the next six years. UNESCO will no doubt do its utmost to contribute to the attainment of the United Nations Millennium Summit target of halving poverty by the year 2015. In Nigeria we are, under a poverty eradication programme, putting in place schemes aimed at creating opportunities for our people to improve their quality of life. This is a theme I am personally committed to, and part of my inspiration comes from my experience six years ago as a member of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life. The eradication of poverty cannot be contemplated without dealing with the scourge of illiteracy and finding a systematic way of raising the level of knowledge of the populace at large. UNESCO has an important role to play in international fora to emphasize the crucial significance of education and culture and also to highlight the significance of introducing the scientific and communication dimensions into successive poverty reduction policies. The face of poverty cannot be captured in monetary terms alone, it is much more complex and diverse.

We are currently engaged – with UNESCO's support – in an exercise that entails reviving, revamping, improving and updating every aspect of our education system, at all levels – primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and special education. We firmly believe in

the right of all our citizens to education. This right must be translated from an ideal into a living reality. This was our vision when we launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme two years ago. We have given the same attention to the content and quality of our education. Given the ethnic diversity of our country, we have been most mindful of the need to use education as a unifying factor and an element of cohesion in nation building. Universal basic education was therefore conceived as a key component of the education for all (EFA) approach for which we, as an E-9 nation, bear particular responsibility, and for which we have sought UNESCO's cooperation.

Madam President, in their joint statement on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Dakar World Education Forum in June 2001, the UNESCO Director-General, together with the heads of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and the World Bank, quite rightly observed that the educational challenge is greatest in Africa. It was also observed that about half of the countries of Africa are unlikely to reach the target of universal primary enrolment by the year 2015. Furthermore, it is quite possible that halfway through the next decade, more than 30% of children will never attend primary school or learn to read and write. This is politically and morally unacceptable. We have the responsibility to avert this situation. The only way to do so is to mobilize now for effective and purposeful action. A special and concerted effort is warranted for this purpose, since African nations must grapple with a myriad of socio-economic difficulties, which militate against their aspirations to provide adequate education to their peoples. Our EFA obligations are compounded by the tremendous needs for preventive education to counter HIV/AIDS. Nigeria last May hosted the Abuja Summit to articulate an African action programme. We call on the international community to contribute generously to the United Nations HIV/AIDS Global Trust Fund, established at that Summit to fight HIV/AIDS to a standstill.

Developing countries feel deserted as a result of the dramatic drop in official development assistance. We call on all our development partners, especially the OECD countries and the international financial institutions, to join us in providing a critical mass of financial resources. Let us set a moderate scale of 0.5% of GDP in the next five years. In this regard, it is also pertinent to raise the debt issue. Let me plead, once again, that African countries should be relieved of their debt burden, which impedes national development and the provision of education and other social services. We recognize that recently there has been some movement regarding debt relief, such as through the programme for Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). But this is hardly enough. What is required is the total eradication of the burden, so as to give a survival chance to the countries struggling simultaneously to make ends meet and to pay off their debt. We must also design innovative approaches that can revitalize and sustain our education systems, such as debt-for-education swaps.

In culture, Nigeria is currently engaged in a re-evaluation of our heritage and in ensuring that our development plans and programmes are firmly based on our culture. Our government encourages science and basic research, and we are determined to build a science-literate society in which members are better able to contribute to – and benefit from – the advancement of science. We are thus particularly encouraged by the second cross-cutting theme chosen for the Organization's future mid-term focus, namely the use of information and communication technology for the development of education, science and culture, and their contribution to the emerging knowledge society. Considerable hopes were raised on this subject in the wake of the G-8 Summits in Okinawa and Genoa, as well as a flurry of international activities, not least the DotForce. Yet there seems a danger that these plans may not take off. So let me sound a warning: if there is no effective action to arrest and close the

gaping ICT chasm that now separates the industrialized world from most developing countries, we will all be courting disaster! Inequalities are bound to deepen and will concern a sizeable part of the world community to the ghetto of a new type of marginalization and underdevelopment. The consequences cannot be imagined.

UNESCO has a cardinal responsibility to ensure universal access to information and communication technologies. However, UNESCO cannot perform this role alone. It must work, as it is doing, with other relevant partners, including the private sector. Reducing the digital divide is also inextricably linked to education. To attain the EFA goals, there must be massive utilization of ICTs. They can be an instrument for reducing costs and increasing the efficiency of education systems. They can also contribute to a shortening of the educational process. ICT-assisted learning will allow individual instruction of a quality which can seldom be reached by individual teachers. Above all, ICTs must be deployed to educate adult illiterates and children who are, and will remain, out of the reach of traditional education systems. As many countries have no experience in that area, we look to UNESCO to be a pacesetter and inventor, a clearing house and a laboratory in this cutting-edge area. We note with satisfaction that UNESCO is entering the new millennium with a new Medium-Term Strategy and a new biennial programme.

Madam President, our technological and cultural destinies are intertwined. So also are our fortunes. It is only through genuine international solidarity and cooperation that we can work together for the good of all peoples, and in fulfilment of the hope that inspired the founders of our Organization, to envision a UNESCO that can indeed advance, through the educational, scientific and cultural relations of the people of the world, towards the objectives of international peace and the common good of all humankind.

I thank you all.