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**REPLY TO THE GENERAL POLICY DEBATE**

by  
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Paris, 24 October 2001

Mr President of the General Conference,  
Madam Chairperson of the Executive Board,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

These last 10 days have been for me very intense moments. Three heads of State, more than 120 ministers, 15 non-governmental organizations and three intergovernmental organizations – some 180 speakers in all – have participated in the general policy debate of the 31st session of the General Conference.

I would like first of all to express to you my profound gratitude, gratitude for your having contributed to and inspired a debate of such richness, which has put ethics, in the broadest sense of the term, in the forefront of your concerns. Education for all, management of freshwater resources, the ethics of science and technology, cultural diversity, dialogue among civilizations, equitable access to information: these are essentially ethical preoccupations. You have recognized therein the major challenges that UNESCO must meet. After listening to all of you, I was struck by one thing: above and beyond these preoccupations, there is a higher imperative which is at once the most pressing of ethical challenges and the prerequisite for the achievement of globalization with a human face, namely, the elimination of poverty.

As President Obasanjo so rightly declared, poverty cannot be understood solely in monetary or even economic terms. It is a much more complex phenomenon. Many of you stressed the need to strengthen the ethical argument for the combat against poverty and to think more closely about the links between poverty and diversity. More generally, you have all emphasized the need to obtain tangible and rapid results on this front. The credibility of the entire United Nations system is here at stake, which means that we have to make a concerted effort, together with the institutions of the United Nations system and our other partners, to develop programmes of awareness-raising, mobilization and concrete actions.

Unless significant progress is made in this struggle, in which the entire international community must be involved, our own objectives – learning to live together, promoting cultural diversity, encouraging dialogue among cultures, introducing ethics at the heart of scientific research and the management of natural resources – all these objectives, the importance and relevance of which you have underlined, will have little chance of being achieved. Hatred, intolerance, violence and fanaticism will always find excuses and pretexts for spreading. The reduction of poverty is an ethical and political imperative which is at the core of the concept of human security. It is also, for me, a personal challenge in response to which I intend to mobilize all the Organization's forces, at Headquarters and in the field, in the coming years.

One of the first conclusions that I draw from this debate is the trust you place in UNESCO as a multilateral forum and an actor with a crucial role to play in the current international circumstances. As you have all emphasized, UNESCO's agenda has suddenly moved to the top of the international agenda. This is a challenge for our Organization, which,

though it may no longer need to prove its relevance, will have to demonstrate its ability to respond effectively and rapidly to the expectations placed upon it.

Many of you saw the proposals contained in the Medium-Term Strategy as a suitable strategic framework for meeting those challenges. That is my second conclusion and one that I am pleased about. I am especially pleased that the five priorities that I selected for the next biennium received very broad endorsement.

Once this renewal of the programme has been carried out, we will have to concentrate on the quality of its implementation and the achievement of results. We will have to consolidate and renew our partnerships, strive for excellence and focus on transparency. We must promote our message and our achievements more effectively, thereby raising our profile. We must also continue our effort of concentration, an effort which, as I am well aware, has only just started, albeit that the many expectations placed upon UNESCO, as expressed during this general policy debate, while they constitute in themselves a vote of confidence in our Organization, are not conducive to concentration. A collective effort is therefore required, and we must pursue it together with realism and determination.

I was pleased to note that many delegations, in the plenary meetings or in the Administrative Commission, stressed that a zero nominal growth budget constituted a major obstacle to the successful accomplishment of our mission. Zero nominal growth should certainly not be raised to the status of an absolute dogma, and I greatly hope that this trust you have shown in the new UNESCO will be translated into budgetary terms in the years to come.

It is true that extrabudgetary resources are, and will continue to be, a major source of funding enabling the scope and impact of our actions to be extended, particularly at national level. Allow me to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the States that have generously proposed extrabudgetary funding in the past, and to say that I hope the current level will be maintained, and even increased. However, I consider that the level of the budget allocated to an organization is an important measure of the trust placed in it by its Member States and of their commitment to truly multilateral cooperation.

A third conclusion that needs to be drawn is that the support you have given to the reform I have embarked upon has been, I think, unanimous. I am both honoured and very encouraged by your many positive comments. Of course, reform is not a one-off event but a process, a process which must be pursued just as energetically in the years to come, in order to adapt our Organization to the realities of the world today and bring about the necessary change of culture.

I am convinced that decentralization is one of the main aspects of this reform process. Our success in decentralization and in bringing our structures – but above all our action – closer to the countries themselves and their real needs, will be the true litmus test. I know that we are only at the very first stage, albeit the most spectacular one and probably also the most painful. Much remains to be done, in terms of personnel, budget, infrastructure and communication. We will have to draw up real regional and subregional strategies and change the nature of relations between Headquarters and the field. For my part I am determined to succeed, and I am confident that I will be able to report substantial progress in this regard at the next session of our General Conference.

Mr President and Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, let me now comment on specific areas which were highlighted during the general debate.

Many delegations pointed to the enormous strides we made with the declaration on cultural diversity. I can only repeat to you what I said in my introductory statement, namely, that the motto “learning to live together in cultural diversity” is surely one of the Organization’s principal tasks, so cruelly highlighted as a top priority by recent events. In this regard, I welcome the broad support expressed concerning the initiative I have proposed for the cultural heritage of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Many speakers drew attention to the linkage between the dialogue among civilizations and UNESCO’s enduring responsibility for the culture of peace. I fully agree that there is no alternative to a patient, long and sometimes protracted process of building peace in the minds of men, women and children. Not only is it our mission enshrined in the Constitution, but the alternative would be inaction, indifference and defeat. UNESCO, as lead agency within the United Nations system for the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, will seek to build on the extraordinary global mobilization achieved during the International Year for the Culture of Peace. Education for citizenship, values education, human rights education and, of course, the related efforts to enhance dialogue among civilizations will be a vital dimension of this ongoing endeavour.

This latter area, dialogue among civilizations and cultures, cannot but be reinforced, in the view of many delegations, especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks against the United States. Presidents Obasanjo, Chirac and Adamkus spoke most eloquently about the nexus between dialogue, diversity, respect for the other, shared values and the practical lessons for international, national and community relations. You, Mr President, have long championed this cause. Fate has it that, as the world is confronted with a wave of terrorism, we are observing the year 2001 as United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. UNESCO had in reality assumed the lead role in organizing events and initiating activities, such as the New York Presidential Round Table, conferences in Tashkent, Vilnius, Tokyo and Kyoto, and many other significant events around the world. As I announced, I shall pursue the proposal to convene, at the highest political level, a conference which will serve to take stock of the accomplishments and lessons of that Year 2001 and chart the way for a long-term endeavour, especially by UNESCO, to concretize and bolster a broad-based dialogue.

In that connection, the debate has highlighted ethical issues and the question of commonly shared values as crucial dimensions of UNESCO’s work. I referred to this earlier and, to be sure, they are principal elements of the Organization’s mandate in all its areas of competence; hence the welcome spotlight in the debate on UNESCO’s role in the ethics of poverty alleviation, the ethics of science and technology in general, bioethics, ethics and education, and infoethics – as well as their interrelationships.

Ethical issues indeed preoccupy not only governments and experts. Civil society at large feels greatly concerned, and is increasingly questioning scientific and technical developments from a moral and ethical perspective, emphasizing the fine line between the possible and the acceptable. UNESCO will have a dual remit: serving as an intellectual and policy forum is one, preparing normative instruments the other. Universal solutions may have to be reconciled with regional approaches, as we seek to balance globalization with diversity in the ethical sphere too.

Your unanimous support for my proposal for the ethics of science and technology as the principal priority of Major Programme III for the Social and Human Sciences Sector during the next biennium is most encouraging. Equally, the Round Table of Ministers of Science on bioethics, attended by some 50 ministers, sends a strong signal of UNESCO’s preparedness to

tackle the crucial issues of our time. I am confident that UNESCO is uniquely positioned, by virtue of its experience and expertise, to continue playing the lead role in this area, as it has done over many years. It is important to avoid the creation of parallel bodies. At the same time, we must strengthen and consolidate inter-agency coordination in the rapidly changing area of bioethics and encourage other agencies to participate and contribute according to their respective competencies.

Forty years ago, Jawaharlal Nehru dubbed UNESCO the “ethical conscience of mankind”. This may be too generous a characterization. Nevertheless, we must strive to live up to that expectation in as concrete a fashion as possible; for example, by advancing standard-setting in bioethics and other areas. The Secretariat stands ready, through the diverse competencies assembled in the various sectors, to assist governments in taking up the different ethical issues at hand and to do justice to their complexity.

In the normative and standard-setting area, many delegations applauded the accomplishments of the Organization thus far in its ground-breaking work aimed at generating international instruments and standards concerning the underwater heritage, the intangible heritage, cultural diversity (as I have just said), bioethics, cyberspace and multilingualism. These tasks are the direct materialization of what has been identified as one of the three main strategic axes around which the Organization’s mission is to be implemented. It is one of the *raison d’être* of UNESCO and we will seek to strengthen our support to governments in this area. As regards the intangible heritage, I have carefully noted your views concerning the further work we need to do, and we shall indeed apply ourselves to the necessary clarification of the concept as a pre-requisite for normative action.

I welcome the strong linkages many of you made between the goals of education and those of poverty eradication. Poverty eradication is at once a compelling ethical mission, and our daily challenge in our work in basic education. Many of you indeed spoke at length about Education for All (EFA). UNESCO has accepted and integrated fully into its Medium-Term Strategy the six commitments agreed at the World Education Forum in Dakar. We are ready to assist countries in formal and non-formal education, we are ready to support efforts to enhance the quality of education, we are ready to take the lead in promoting preventive education as a means to fight against HIV/AIDS, we are ready to bolster the reform of educational systems, we are ready to operate the EFA observatory as a prerequisite for evidence-based policy formulation and, as we have already demonstrated, we are ready to bring together all the partners in the EFA movement in order to facilitate the formulation of national EFA plans and to mobilize the required resources.

The pursuit of EFA is an enormously challenging and complex task, and many delegations have recognized this in their interventions. What UNESCO needs, for its part, is more substantive and generous support from the international community to enable us to perform fully to your expectations. I am thinking here less in terms of extra financial resources, though these certainly will be required. Rather, I would like to invite countries able to do so to provide us with human resources, for a limited period of time or for specific regions or issues. This can be done through the detachment of experts or other modalities. In particular, I would like to see more experts and expertise from developing countries involved and integrated into this overall exercise.

In the past, in order to highlight the particular disadvantages of certain regions or groups, notably Africa, the least developed countries (LDCs), gender and youth, UNESCO has made special institutional arrangements. Today, it is imperative that these special areas of

concern are genuinely mainstreamed into the broad channels of UNESCO's work, in terms of effective and productive action. What is clear is that the problems have not gone away or lessened in severity; if anything, they are getting worse in many parts of the world. As the world economy drifts towards recession, the plight of many developing countries, and the communities and individuals they contain, will become more serious. Let me stress again that, throughout the full range of its programmes, UNESCO will mainstream concrete responses to the needs of Africa and the LDCs, fully responding to the priorities set by the leaders of these countries. In that connection, I am pleased to inform you that on 8 and 9 November 2001, UNESCO will organize in Paris an international seminar on future approaches and strategies for the development of Africa in the twenty-first century. I look forward to your active attendance at this important event.

The same applies to the pursuit of the goals of gender equality. During the debate, I noted in this regard that particular emphasis was given to ensuring access at all levels to quality education for girls and women, including science education. We will certainly address these issues. Similarly, we shall integrate our ongoing and undiminished concern for youth into our programmes and activities. The holding of the Youth Forum at this General Conference session was one illustration of that concern. I shall come back to this later.

I mentioned earlier the overwhelming concern expressed about human security. This is indeed one of the strategic objectives of the Medium-Term Strategy. We can and must do more to respond to the desperate needs of the most vulnerable societies and the most vulnerable segments of those societies. This certainly applies to those living in extreme poverty, and also those who are victims of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. We need to deepen and extend our understanding of human insecurity and vulnerability and the way they are linked to various forms of disempowerment; for example, through the devaluation or destruction of a people's cultural world, as expressed through local and indigenous knowledge, languages, customs and values, and livelihoods. How UNESCO addresses the question of human security should also be seen in the context of the agreements reached at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.

To maximize our comparative advantages, our work regarding human security must be undertaken on several levels. It must also be closely linked to our various activities in advancing sustainable development, especially in preparation for next year's Rio+10 Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The sterling role played by the five intergovernmental and international scientific committees lays a solid foundation for UNESCO's future contribution to sustainability. The principal priority "water and ecosystems", which I have proposed for the Natural Sciences Sector for the next two years, will add to the competencies offered by UNESCO and will contribute constructively to the international mobilization leading towards Johannesburg. Good governance, human rights, pluralism and democracy, as well as a renewal of the Organization's engagement with civil society, will be other core issues for the future which will also be framed in the context of conflict prevention and fostering social stability.

The delegate of Liberia characterized UNESCO in wonderful imagery as "a colossal fountain of knowledge and learning". The theme of our second cross-cutting strategy for the medium-term is intended to help tap this fountain. If UNESCO wants to succeed as a global knowledge broker and empowerment agent, it must help to apply information and communication technologies in education, science and culture and in the construction of a knowledge society.

In that effort, I agree with the speakers who pointed out that we must avoid being carried away by the dazzling opportunities of cutting-edge technologies. Rather, I would envision UNESCO as a pioneer and intermediary to link and mesh traditional media and technologies, such as radio and television, with the technically more demanding – and expensive – tools such as the internet. We have already successfully demonstrated the potential of such linkages through the community centres in Kothmale in Sri Lanka and Timbuktu in Mali. Building and expanding UNESCO's role in distance education, especially for non-formal educational approaches, will be another niche which we are well positioned to occupy, driven by intersectoral activities drawing on the expertise available in the Education and Communications and Information Sectors. Many delegations correctly stressed that the technological chasm between “the haves” and “the have-nots” is widening every day. They demand that we prove our resolve and mettle through more concrete action and projects, and less through talk and the design of yet another action programme which may never be implemented.

By the way, it is noteworthy how much the deliberations of the Youth Forum focused on the digital divide, along with other key themes and issues. I was very happy that we managed, with a minimum of resources, to organize this Forum. And I was even happier when I learned of the relevance of the Forum's recommendations. Let me just single out three of them, as they are very pertinent to the agenda of this General Conference. Firstly, with respect to poverty, the youth delegates proposed “a new vision of globalization, putting people before material values” and stressed that “poverty is a denial of basic human rights”. While they called for specific action, they also offered themselves as a resource, emphasizing that peer education and non-formal education in general are essential to achieve development goals. Secondly, with regard to the role of information and communication technologies, the Youth Forum underlined that “using the appropriate technology is vital and ICT projects must not be limited to the Internet”. Traditional media will remain important instruments to spread information and UNESCO should support training and networking of student radio stations and assist in creating telecentres. Thirdly, in the “Youth Declaration on Terrorism and War”, the Forum delegates expressed their wish “to build a future based on education for all, a culture of peace, scientific cooperation, respect for cultural diversity and call for a permanent dialogue among cultures and civilizations”.

We all should be proud of having created this opportunity for exchange and dialogue and for seeking solutions. I wish to commend all the participants, organizers and sponsors for this successful event, for their dedication and for the quality of their deliberations. I hope we can organize such a Forum again in the future.

As we reach out to youth, so must we reach out to all our constituencies of support and partnership. UNESCO has no intention of attempting to do everything alone. We need to work in collaboration with all parts of the community, some of which are long-standing partners, while others are relatively new. A long-established partnership exists, of course, with the National Commissions, one of the main pillars of UNESCO; the need to strengthen this partnership was emphasized by many speakers. As you know, prior to this General Conference, I had taken the initiative to write to all Member States to share with them my concern that National Commissions be given proper resources and recognition to facilitate their important role as part of the overall constitutional infrastructure of the Organization. I can assure you that I will continue the dialogue with our National Commissions and examine the best possible ways to support them. Let us find together innovative approaches to strengthen the National Commissions through support for capacity-building and in programme

implementation. All UNESCO's field offices, for their part, have the responsibility to work closely with National Commissions towards these goals.

If we are serious about outreach and broadening the range of partnership, we must also strengthen our relations with civil society and its constituent elements. EFA is a case in point, where there is a clear need to develop a new culture of policy dialogue that brings civil society into regular conversation with government, the private sector and the international community. UNESCO can facilitate this exchange by continuing its constructive and inclusive dialogue with our non-governmental organization partners and other representatives of civil society. I was particularly pleased by the supportive statement made for my proposals in this area by the President of the International Conference of non-governmental organizations.

In conclusion, let me again thank each and every delegation for the enormous wealth of thoughtful and constructive statements. You are UNESCO – and the Secretariat will respond as fully as possible to your aspirations, suggestions and decisions. As Director-General, I pledge to you that, during the next two years before the General Conference convenes again, the Secretariat will strive to fulfil your expectations and to do so in a responsive, responsible and transparent manner.

Perhaps you will allow me to close with my personal comment, which echoes a hope expressed by many of you. There is in this hall a consensus regarding the renewed relevance and credibility of this Organization and a shared conviction that the recent events in the United States make that relevance stand out in even sharper relief. This elicits a third observation: the international community more than ever needs a UNESCO of universal membership if it is to carry out its mission to the full. Let us hope that all nations and all UNESCO's constituencies will actively engage in our efforts to build the new UNESCO.