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Address by  
H.E. Ms Mendieta de Badaroux

Chairperson of the Executive Board  
of the United Nations Educational,  
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(UNESCO)

at the inaugural meeting of the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO

Paris, 15 October 2001

Madam President of the General Conference,  
Mr Director-General,  
Excellencies and Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address you in my capacity as Chairperson of the Executive Board of UNESCO. I should like to extend a very warm welcome to our new Member State, Yugoslavia, while expressing my gratitude to the Government of that country for having rejoined the Organization and for its willingness to cooperate in a significant manner with UNESCO. I should also like to welcome our new Associate Member State, the State of Tokelau, from the Pacific. These States' membership is a significant step forward towards our ideal of universality and multilateral cooperation. I wish to thank the Director-General for his kind cooperation with the Executive Board and for the work that he has done during the biennium.

Madam President, as we meet once more at UNESCO on the occasion of a new session of the General Conference, we all know that this occasion has taken on an importance that goes beyond our deliberations and the final approval of our new Medium-Term Strategy for 2002-2007 and Programme and Budget for 2002-2003. In fact, by exceeding our expectations, this session might become the crucible for the future role of the Organization. The turn that events have suddenly taken in the world calls for adjustments in all fields, and we must therefore regard this session also as a convenient opportunity to help UNESCO urgently to draw up its future programme for peace, security and human development in the broadest possible sense. By virtue of its intellectual mandate, UNESCO must rise to the challenges of the world today and make a unique contribution to the dilemma of terrorism and world insecurity. As Member States of the Organization, we are in an ideal position to chart its future course, as well as our own. We must diligently help the Organization to define the role that it must play, as a United Nations agency, in the face of current events. Although the present Draft Programme and Budget could not anticipate all the measures that the reprehensible acts of terrorism that have struck the United States of America demand, we must be confident that, as a result of our collective wisdom, this session of the General Conference will succeed in introducing the necessary adjustments in a satisfactory manner.

In recommending that the General Conference approve the draft Medium-Term Strategy for 2002-2007 and the draft Programme and Budget for 2002-2003, the Executive Board is confident that, if they are pursued properly and with care, the general objectives of the Organization for the next six years will contribute significantly towards the alleviation of poverty, the eradication of illiteracy, the acceptance of cultural diversity and the sharing of wealth and knowledge. The two normative documents have been discussed in detail by the Executive Board, whose Members expressed their approval during the extensive consultations undertaken by the Director-General, before they were drafted, among the Member States, National Commissions and non-governmental organizations. The new global alliance to combat terrorism must – we stress – also extend to the struggle against the remediable causes, the attitudes and the policies that lie at the root of the current international war. As this is the most important intellectual organization in the world, we must investigate in depth the virtues of permanent dialogue and strive to eliminate injustice, racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance, which seriously threaten the survival of our planet.

Madam President, within the context of UNESCO's reform process the Medium-Term Strategy will be implemented with due consideration for the need to concentrate the Organization's efforts on a limited number of priority fields, with a view to ensuring the lasting effectiveness of its action. I should like to congratulate the Director-General on the innovations introduced in both the C/4 and C/5 documents, for example, the cross-cutting themes and the focus on results-based main lines of action.

The draft Programme and Budget for 2002-2003 includes two cross-cutting themes. The first theme is the eradication of poverty, especially extreme poverty, one of whose goals is to contribute towards poverty alleviation through the social integration of the young people marginalized and displaced in many countries of the world as a consequence of violence, discrimination and exclusion. By strengthening national and subregional capacities, this project implicitly aims to promote human dignity, basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. The second cross-cutting theme is the contribution of information and communication technologies to the development of education, science and culture and the construction of a knowledge society. By using the information and communication technologies to develop education, science and culture, these activities aim to narrow the digital divide and remedy disparities in access to information. These cross-cutting themes are new and very convincing in their aim to provide lasting solutions to the ills that prevent many millions of people from achieving prosperity and well-being. Without prejudging the results of UNESCO's action, we must not lose sight of the impact of globalization on human development, the survival of cultures and cultural diversity. We must ensure that concern for the well-being of others is cultivated everywhere. The Organization has an important role to play in promoting understanding among human beings and in channelling the global processes of human development.

We all have an obligation to ensure that the well-being of all citizens is one of the features of each nation, that the achievements and resources of the world are within the reach of all and that in no country is any one of the 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights violated.

Madam President, in view of its character as an intellectual organization, UNESCO is the ideal forum for reflection and action on the human development problems that affect everyone everywhere. In the present situation, the importance of UNESCO's reputation and credibility takes on a new significance, and we, its Member States, are in the best position to help it to attain its objectives by enhancing its visibility, its unique mandate and the relevance of its programmes in our countries.

Madam President, I should like to conclude by expressing my firm belief that, at this time when we are seeking the way forward, the General Conference will guide UNESCO – where the cultures of the world find expression – through this critical period of transition, in a spirit of solidarity and determination. I hope that we will approach the numerous discussions and decisions ahead guided by the strength of our convictions and united in our aims. I thank you for your attention and should like to reiterate that it is incumbent upon each of us to make this a productive, inspiring and memorable session.

Thank you.