

DG/2002/38
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

at the opening session of the International Symposium
on Science and Technology

Manama, Bahrain, 20 April 2002

Distinguished Minister,
Ambassador and Permanent Delegate,
Madame Secretary-General of the Bahrain National Commission
for UNESCO,
Distinguished experts and participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, first of all, to thank most sincerely the Bahraini government and, in particular, His Excellency Dr Mohammed J.K. Al-Ghatam, the Minister of Education, for their warm welcome and for inviting me to participate in the Opening Ceremony of this important International Symposium on Science and Technology. This Symposium will launch the process of charting a new vision for Bahrain along lines which are of particular interest to UNESCO. I also wish to greet the international experts and to thank them for agreeing to make their national and regional experience available to this process. As eminent experts, you are often in demand and we appreciate your commitment to stay throughout the entire period of the symposium.

It is a great pleasure for me to visit, for the first time, the Kingdom of Bahrain, which has a long and distinguished history dating back to the third millennium B.C. It is especially interesting to visit your beautiful country at this moment when your government is pursuing a progressive policy of democratic reform and social liberalization. I was delighted to learn, while preparing for my visit, of the outstanding performance of Bahrain in several fields of development. I will cite a few examples. The United Nations Development Report has consistently classified Bahrain amongst the high human development group of countries. The country is rated among the top three in the world for readily accessible health services for the population. Your system of education is open to all children, with an admirable level of gender equity, and you have just declared Bahrain a fully literate society. In the 2001 edition of the Index of Economic Freedom, Bahrain holds ninth place among 155 countries, following closely on the heels of United States and United Kingdom which ranked 5th and 7th respectively.

Given this tradition of excellence, I better understand your determination to deploy scientific resources, including information and communication technologies (ICTs), for economic and social development in order to realize your national objective of creating a new knowledge-based society. The challenges are many, Mr Minister, and the implications for developing countries are enormous, as you so clearly stated in your address to the International Conference on Education organized by UNESCO's IBE in Geneva last September.

The two working documents of the Symposium provide both a theoretical framework and empirical evidence to support the case for giving greater attention to science in the national development agenda. I am sure that the documents will serve as a good starting point for your deliberations.

Allow me to make some general remarks to illustrate how UNESCO accords high importance and priority to the main theme of this symposium; I will then come back to the national process that you are about to launch.

First, I begin with the priority being accorded to the sciences in UNESCO. The main programmatic vision informing our new Medium-Term Strategy (2002-2007) is that of contributing to peace and development in an era of globalization. We recognize that the challenges arising from globalization are becoming increasingly complex, often driven by scientific and technological breakthroughs and innovations. To meet these challenges, decision-making and policy-formation must be fully informed as to their scientific underpinning and consequences. This requires drawing on inputs not only from the natural sciences but also from the social and human sciences; it also requires the creative combination of these inputs in an atmosphere of partnership. In these matters, UNESCO is in a unique position to assist and advise governments through its multi-disciplinary expertise, which countries can draw upon as they seek to design a balanced and equitable transition towards modern knowledge societies.

It was for this reason that, as part of my reform of the Organization's programmes, I decided to revive UNESCO's science and technology policy activities; indeed, I created a new division for this purpose. The assistance provided through this programme is aimed at enabling Member States in the developing world to assume ownership of their development programmes in the fields of science and technology.

The development of capacities for the formulation of science and technology policies and strategies, along with the promotion of science education, are our two main priorities for the follow-up of the World Conference on Science held in Budapest in 1999. It is important to emphasize the key role that Ministries of Education can and should play in laying the foundations for a science-based society. Research and Development will represent the driving force in this domain. We are also placing emphasis on human and institutional capacity-building and networking in the basic sciences and engineering, and on the improvement of human security, broadly understood, through better management of the environment and social change. Please note that water resources management is an absolute priority for UNESCO in its current biennium (2002-2003).

My second remark focuses on information and communication technologies (ICTs), which represent a strong lever for economic growth and development. In its medium-term perspective, UNESCO's action will be in line with the objectives set out in the resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council on "the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy"; in addition, our action will be guided by the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Education, science and culture are at the heart of the trend towards a knowledge society, as are the media and information. Since ICTs affect every field of competence of UNESCO, our strategy incorporates a cross-cutting theme concerning the contribution of ICTs to the development of education, science and culture and the construction of a knowledge society. This strategy aims to enhance learning opportunities through access to diversified contents and delivery systems; to promote the use of ICTs for empowerment, governance and social participation; and to strengthen capacities for scientific research, information sharing and cultural exchanges.

We believe that the impact of ICTs will be felt most strongly in the activities and products of the human mind. Therefore, one of our major emphases is upon the use of ICTs in education; in this area, we have developed a number of operational projects that have attracted donor support. Let me cite three examples of such projects in the Arab region.

The AVICENNA Virtual Campus, funded by the European Commission, is a Euro-Mediterranean network of 15 universities for open distance learning. The campus is named after Ibn Sina (980 - 1037 A.D.), known in the West by the name of Avicenna, who was the most famous physician, philosopher, mathematician and astronomer of his time.

The second example is a project on e-learning for blind people which aims at creating a multi-media cyberspace for special needs education, using new information technology and new methods of science pedagogy for the training of trainers and students at all levels of education. The main component of the project is the introduction of the 'virtual classroom' concept, including the graphic screen reader system in Braille for English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Hindi and Urdu languages. In cooperation with AGFUND, the virtual classroom concept for blind people has been implemented in the Noor Institute for the Blind in Qatar. On the occasion of my visit to the Institute on 30 December 2001, I saw a presentation about this most interesting project. The same virtual classroom concept for the blind will be implemented in several centres in Saudi Arabia in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and in 22 other Arab countries.

The third example, which is of very recent origin, is the project to develop the technology infrastructure of the Arab Open University, an institution of distance higher education initiated by His Royal Highness Prince Talal Bin Abdulaziz, President of Agfund. I understand that Bahrain will host a branch of this university. At UNESCO, we are very pleased to be the executing agency for this exciting project, in which there will be a strong investment of ICTs. On completion of the project, the delivery systems of the Arab Open University will include a virtual library, an interactive video-conferencing system, distance learning production studios, and e-learning systems.

My third general remark concerns the role of science in the construction of peace. Within the United Nations system, UNESCO is playing a leading role in consolidating the culture of peace and promoting dialogue among civilizations and cultures. Our forms of action include the mobilization of non-government organizations and artists, the promotion of peace education and research, and the award of UNESCO prizes. In addition, we have participated in international meetings such as the International Conference “For an Islam of Peace: the meeting of Islam and the West” held in January 2000 and the International Symposium on “Reforming the United Nations to give peace a chance” held in January 2001. Several of these meetings have provided me additional opportunities to work closely with the Heads of ISESCO and ALECSO.

I deeply deplore the escalation of violence and destruction in the Middle East at the present time. I particularly condemn the loss of human life caused by military action as well as by terrorist acts. These are matters on which I have expressed my concerns publicly on many occasions. We are aware that, unfortunately, it is not during the heat of crisis that UNESCO can best fulfil its mandate but during the phases of prevention and reconstruction. Consequently, I have alerted all of UNESCO to ready itself for the work of reconstruction and reconciliation awaiting us; I sincerely hope that this work can begin soon. We must anticipate that which we hope for and prepare ourselves accordingly.

As soon as circumstances permit, UNESCO would like to dispatch a high-level intersectoral mission to undertake an assessment of reconstruction needs in the fields of our competence. We would also evaluate the requirements for re-building the bridges between Israeli and Palestinian civil society. It is clear that opportunities will need to be devised so that both sides can reflect together on a common way forward and meet together around common projects. Above all, we must create a platform of dialogue not only for intellectuals but also between NGOs, women and youth.

We would also seek to re-launch two specific initiatives whose realization has been impeded by the worsening situation: a project to revise Palestinian and Israeli textbooks with a view to building peace in the minds of children and youth; and a comprehensive plan to safeguard the Old City of Jerusalem. Moreover, scientific pursuits, such as the exchange of scientific knowledge, the conduct of joint research projects, and the education of young scientists and engineers, are essential for creating linkages between people, institutions, societies and cultures. They are vital for promoting intercultural exchange and dialogue.

It is for this reason that we attach great importance to the UNESCO-initiated project to create the International Centre for Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications for the Middle East (SESAME), located in the Al-Balqa' Applied University in Allaan, Jordan. The centrepiece of SESAME will be a synchrotron radiation source based on a gift from Germany. The project aims to advance research in the Middle East while fostering peaceful cooperation among the region's scientific communities and enhancing political rapprochement, which is badly needed in the region. I am delighted that Bahrain has joined the Interim Council of SESAME. The other members are Armenia, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Ten other countries also serve on the Interim Council as observers. In addition to being an excellent tool for peace-building, SESAME will help to reverse the brain-drain by attracting scientists based in the Middle East as well as in the wider diaspora.

Let me now return to the specific objectives of the Symposium, which coalesce around three inter-related processes: the elaboration of a national science and technology policy; the establishment of a medium-term programme of investment in science and technology; and the design of a national strategy for ICTs in education in Bahrain.

I am sure that you will build on the results of the consultation with stakeholders, held here in Manama earlier this month, to arrive at specific recommendations for follow-up action, including the institutional mechanisms that should be put in place for formulating these policies and strategies. UNESCO, as part of the implementation of its Medium-Term Strategy, will foster international cooperation regarding the adoption of science and technology policies that are consistent with ethical considerations and that put science in the service of societal needs. We have taken note of your desire to deploy science and technology (especially ICTs) in order to develop your human resources and to strengthen your efforts to diversify the national economy.

UNESCO welcomes this initiative by the Kingdom of Bahrain and will continue to work closely with its Ministry of Education in following-up the outcomes of this symposium. We shall be happy to help you formulate your national strategy and national plan, and we shall support your applications to secure funding from various donors for your projects.

While UNESCO has an international mandate and also responds to the requests of individual Member States, we attach great importance to cooperation and integration at the sub-regional level as one of the key means of addressing issues of globalization. Building on our Medium-Term Strategy and using our network of field offices, we are consulting with a wide variety of stakeholders as we elaborate our regional and sub-regional strategies to foster cooperation and integration at these levels. It is my hope that, after developing the critical mass of national expertise in science and technology policy and planning, this model initiative in Bahrain will be expanded to include the harmonization of science policies and the building of scientific cooperation networks and mechanisms in the whole Gulf region. Such a regional effort is indispensable to support the development of a strategic vision for the industrialization of Islamic/Arab countries, as proposed by our sister agency, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Mr Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by assuring you that we share the determination of the Kingdom of Bahrain to reap the benefits of the advances in science and technology and to use them for the people's welfare. There are some good examples of geographically small countries that have succeeded in doing this: Singapore and Iceland are two models that come readily to mind. I am pleased that we have here today experts from these countries as well as from Finland, Malaysia, and the Netherlands. I am confident that Bahrain will succeed in her efforts to become a model in the Gulf region of how a small country can meet the challenges posed by globalization and rapid scientific and technical progress.

I wish you every success in your deliberations and look forward to receiving your recommendations, to which we shall pay close attention for appropriate follow-up.

Thank you.