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Address by
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Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the National Conference on Educational Reform

Kuwait, 22 April 2002

His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs,
His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Moubarek Al-Sabah, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Defence,
His Excellency Dr Musaed Rashed Al-Haroun, the Minister of Education and Higher Education,
Mr Ahmad Jalali, Chairperson of the General Conference,
Mrs Aziza Bennani, Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This important gathering is being held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait. I would like to applaud His Highness for his support of this event and of the educational reform process more broadly. This occasion also gives me an opportunity to convey once again my thanks to His Highness for his Prize for research in special education for the benefit of mentally handicapped persons. I am delighted that His Highness Sheikh Sabak Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, is with us on this occasion on behalf of His Highness the Emir.

I would like to express my thanks to His Excellency Dr Musaed Al-Haroun, Minister of Education and Higher Education, for his invitation to give the keynote speech at this important Conference. I am greatly honoured by this invitation. I am particularly happy to be here on this occasion because, when I made my first official visit to Kuwait in June 2000, I enjoyed the delightful company of His Excellency Dr Al-Haroun, who was then the Kuwaiti Ambassador to UNESCO. It is most gratifying to see him again in his capacity as Minister of Education and Higher Education.

The purpose of the Conference is to discuss the proposed future strategic plan for education and its implementation. I believe that two particular dimensions of educational reform deserve special attention. First, I believe it is necessary to cultivate a national consensus on the purpose, character and process of educational reform, or what might be called the 'why', the 'what' and the 'how' of changing and improving education systems. Second, it is vital that ideas and experiences drawn from other countries and regions are taken into serious consideration – not, let me add, by importing complete models uncritically but by selecting the best, the most useful and the most appropriate and then adapting them to your requirements and your circumstances.

For these reasons, I am delighted to see that this Conference has attracted the participation of key members of the national constituency: representatives of the Kuwaiti Parliament, the private sector, and educators. In addition, the Conference will benefit from the contributions of a number of international experts in education from the USA, Sweden, Malaysia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the Arab region.

Today's educational reform process in Kuwait can draw upon a long-standing commitment to expanding and improving education at all levels and to the growth of the country's human resources. This commitment and the educational developments it has generated have been influential among Kuwait's neighbours. As a result, the issues of educational reform to be discussed here are not only important for the State of Kuwait but also relevant to the other Gulf States.

Much preparatory work on Kuwait's new education strategy has already been done and I am pleased that UNESCO's active partnership has helped to promote substantial progress. Since the year 2000, UNESCO has collaborated with the Kuwaiti educational authorities in developing a process for elaborating a comprehensive strategy for education, covering all levels and types of education. Four national seminars have been held which sought to improve national capacities for identifying key strategic issues. The four seminars were devoted to technical and vocational education (May 2001), curriculum development and reform (again in May 2001), information and communication technologies (January 2002), and contemporary issues in assessment and evaluation (February 2002).

In these and other ways, UNESCO has been working closely with the Ministry of Education on designing the educational reform process and on preparing a national education strategy. Through the contributions of its own staff and the provision of international consultants, essential technical assistance has been made available. And this, of course, will continue in the future.

It is most significant that Kuwait is conceiving the educational reform in a holistic and systematic way. Let us be clear on two things, however: this does not mean changing everything at once, nor does it mean discounting everything that has gone before. But it does mean embracing the challenge of change in a comprehensive manner. This challenge, of course, is broader than education. It has much to do with globalization, the scientific-technological revolution of our times and their political, social and cultural implications. But the very nature of these wider transformations places a premium on knowledge, information and learning, and this means that education is at the heart of the matter.

Countries seeking to build a thriving knowledge-based society find that they must reconcile different and perhaps conflicting needs. They must adapt themselves to the nature of our globalizing world but, at the same time, they are also impelled to maintain their own distinctive cultural identity. Unless the education imparted to the rising generations is suitably attuned to these complex challenges, it will increasingly be considered irrelevant or out-of-touch.

Many countries today, including Kuwait, have recognized that they face an historic choice. On the one hand, they may embrace change willingly, even enthusiastically, in order to reap its benefits and, hopefully, to mitigate some of its adverse effects. On the other hand, they may reject the menu of changes on offer, in which case they may find themselves overtaken by events or relegated to a marginal backwater. By making the first choice, Kuwait is also accepting certain implications of that choice, one of the most important of which is the need to improve the quality and relevance of education.

For some, this need for educational improvement may be puzzling given the great achievements made by Kuwait's education system over the years. But success can breed its own problems and, as the world changes rapidly or new information becomes available, these problems suddenly appear more serious. I will shortly consider some of these problems but allow me first to place emphasis on the foundation stone of all education systems, namely, basic education.

The guarantee of good quality basic education for all is one of the fundamental responsibilities of all governments. It is a responsibility enshrined in national law and in international commitments. With regard to Education for All, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage you to incorporate all six main goals stated in the Dakar Framework for Action into the design of your educational reform. Two of these goals – the achievement of universal primary education for all by 2015 and the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 – received strong additional support in the Millennium Declaration, but the other four Dakar goals are also vitally important:

- expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes;

- improving adult literacy, especially for women, and ensuring equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Some of these concerns may not be so pressing for a country like Kuwait but none is irrelevant to your situation. In my view, we should not really talk about “learning societies” or “knowledge economies” unless we are truly committed, in policy and practice, to education for all, lifelong learning and education as a fundamental human right. In the case of Kuwait, I believe that an overarching emphasis on the **quality** of basic education for all will provide the most appropriate framing of your actions at this level.

Let me now turn to certain problems and issues which do much to explain the impetus behind the development of a new educational strategy. There is concern, for example, over the levels of learning achievement being attained in Kuwait’s schools, especially in the state sector. The growing interest in educational indicators and in the testing and measurement of learning achievement is understandable when comparative international studies reveal disappointing results. The main question, however, is whether Kuwaiti children and youth are being well served by the education provided to them. If not, how can its quality be improved in order to generate better results?

In this regard, I would like to emphasize the importance of understanding the term “results” in a rounded way. Important though they are, academic test scores are not the only measure of quality. We must never forget that education systems and institutions must ensure the all-round development of each learner. If one aspect is exaggerated or neglected out of proportion to the others, the entire formation of a child is distorted.

We have identified eight other concerns which animate the need for educational reform:

1. the effective use of information and communication technologies in the learning process;
2. the decentralization and diversification of the education system, with an increased role for the school along with more flexible learning opportunities;

3. increased transparency and accountability, linked to the operation of good governance mechanisms at all levels and greater partnership with local communities, parents and civil society;
4. curriculum development, especially the renewal and updating of contents in response to changes in knowledge, values and lifestyles;
5. the particular importance of mathematics and science education;
6. issues of private versus public education;
7. the strengthening of policies and provision in regard to inclusive education, understood as referring not only to children with special needs but also to children who experience other forms of exclusion;
8. improvements in teacher education and training in order to ensure greater professionalism and higher levels of performance.

An abiding and pervasive concern should be the encouragement of active rather than passive learning. Taken seriously, this demands major changes in both teaching and learning practices and also in the way the whole experience of schooling is organized. I cannot over-stress the importance of active learning. It is the foundation of so much that is essential for improved quality in education. Moreover, it is vital for preparing young people to become resourceful, independent and responsible adults, especially in knowledge-based societies that will demand new ways of exercising the duties of democratic citizenship, employment and parenthood.

There remain two outstanding issues which I would like to briefly discuss. As I said at the beginning of my presentation, it is desirable that educational reform rests upon a foundation of national consensus. This requires a process of national dialogue in which all significant social groups and educational actors can express their views and seek common ground. In association with this, it is crucial that political support and commitment are galvanized behind the reform and its aims. Experience from the implementation of effective reform programmes in other countries suggests that careful attention to these factors is necessary for eventual success.

The second issue takes us to the heart of what education is for. It is to be recalled that the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, in its submission to UNESCO known as the Delors Report, identified four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and

learning to live together. A sound and balanced education requires that all four pillars are strong. Sometimes, however, it becomes clear that one pillar requires greater attention. In this regard, I would like to place a timely emphasis on the subject of learning to live together. This is timely because of the events of 11 September and their aftermath, the struggle to place post-Taliban Afghanistan on the road to national reconciliation and reconstruction, the internal strife in such countries as Colombia and Sri Lanka, and, of course, the upsurge of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Educational processes alone cannot solve the world's problems but schools are vital spaces for learning the values and practices of living together in peace. No society can afford to neglect this fundamental function of all education.

In closing, I would like to wish you every success in your deliberations. Be assured that UNESCO is taking a strong and active interest in the tasks before you and we stand ready to assist in any way we can.

Thank you.