



Conférence générale

32e session
Document d'information

Генеральная конференция

32-я сессия
Информационный документ

inf

Paris 2003

General Conference

32nd session
Information document

المؤتمر العام

الدورة الثانية والثلاثون
وثيقة إعلامية

Conferencia General

32ª reunión
Documento de información

大会
第三十二届会议
资料性文件

32 C/INF.11
29 September 2003
Original: English

Address by

H.E. Mr Michael Abiola Omolewa

Ambassador, Permanent Delegate
of Nigeria to UNESCO

on the occasion of his election
as President of the General Conference
at its 32nd session

Paris, 29 September 2003

Your Excellency, Ambassador Ahmad Jalali,
President of the 31st session of the General Conference,
Your Excellency, Ambassador Aziza Bennani,
Chairperson of the Executive Board,
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
Heads and members of delegations and observers,
Distinguished Colleagues and Friends,
Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two years ago, on this very rostrum, my President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo stood before you and reaffirmed his personal, and Nigeria's unhindered commitment to UNESCO, and to its honourable ideals. The honour you have just bestowed on my country and on myself, is for me an immense demonstration of your appreciation and acknowledgement of Nigeria's abiding faithfulness to our organization.

I am sincerely moved by the confidence you have shown in me, electing me to the high office of President of the 32nd session of our General Conference. I feel humbled by the responsibilities of the office but your support gives me vigour. I am confident that with God's guidance and with your kind support, we shall, together, be equal to the challenges of a successful General Conference and a momentous biennium.

Allow me also to express my deep appreciation to my group, the Africa Group, which considered Nigeria, and myself as its representative, their worthy flag-bearer.

I feel privileged and obliged to my Country for presenting me for this singular honour. It seems to me a long way from the precincts of the University, where I first started cooperating with UNESCO, many years ago.

I should also like to congratulate my predecessor, Ambassador Ahmad Jalali, President of the 31st session, for the efficient and dedicated manner in which he acquitted himself as President over the past two years. He truly celebrated the advantage of not being bound to directives, but rather to the constitution of UNESCO, and the collective moral instructions of Member States, to voice views, concepts and sensitivities rooted in the spirit of that constitution.

Please allow me to register here my appreciation to Ambassador Aziza Bennani and all the members of the Executive Board, which she so skilfully chaired over the past two years, for their devotion and their invaluable contribution to the Organization. As our elders say, "Failure to thank someone who helped you yesterday is like carrying away the property of the person".

And finally, I should thank our dear Director-General:

We have closely followed your progress since you took over the running of the Secretariat and we have come to appreciate your commitment, deep devotion and your effective and transparent implementation of an ambitious reform programme.

Mr Director-General, as I take on these new functions, I look forward to our continuing cooperation. Let me pledge to you today that I will leave no stone and no leaf unturned in a quest to secure genuine and meaningful consensus in all the challenging issues, which lie before us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many may see it as a truism, but let me nevertheless repeat it today from this high rostrum: if UNESCO were not already existing, it would need to be invented, given the manifold challenges we face in the world today. UNESCO is needed; UNESCO is relevant, UNESCO delivers and UNESCO is efficient in tackling the global scourge of illiteracy, the water crisis, the lack of access to knowledge and information – and it has a unique track in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures and civilizations. This is no small achievement. Education for all, preservation and conservation of cultural heritage, the upholding of cultural diversity – behind these reverberating slogans lie profound concepts and accomplishments, which are fruits of our common commitment and labour in this House of the World Cultures. To be sure, the quest for peace and the creation of a more equitable and fair world is what bonds us all together and gives our work profound meaning. The Fathers of our Constitution defined the purposes and priorities for our work in a most clairvoyant manner. Today, perhaps more than ever, we have to follow their footsteps, and continue working for peace and human development through education, the sciences, culture and communication.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today, we are still far from eradicating illiteracy and ignorance. Too many of our population are yet to profit from the effect of the various efforts being made for ensuring education for all. The fruits of science and technology are still denied to many and the communication and information gap – indeed the divide that keeps us apart – is growing wider everyday. Ignorance and lack of education and knowledge causes scores of people – young, middle-aged and old alike – to fall victims of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. We must lift the silence and face the bare facts; for without honesty and transparency we will not succeed.

The creation of UNESCO was a tremendous act of faith: Faith in the future, a brighter future for humankind.

And so UNESCO has always demonstrated its resilience and flexibility in dealing with the most urgent needs of the time as articulated by its Member States. One of its finest hours came when it responded to the call of the newly independent nations of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean that joined its ranks in the 1960s. More recently, UNESCO again exhibited great flexibility and inventiveness in coping with the demands of its new Member States from Central and Eastern Europe. And today, we are confronted to respond to the crying needs of countries in conflict and emergencies, whose fate cannot be charted along ideological lines.

Challenges and injustices that, even in this twenty-first century, abound in our world, call for a determined action of UNESCO. Vacuum, disparity, and rifts need to be bridged, injustices need to be tackled, and ignorance must be battled. It is therefore essential that we become an assembly of nations committed to solidarity, equity and brotherhood.

How can we ensure that our accumulated knowledge and know-how, which has given rise to so many quantum leaps, will also help us to find and tap the wisdom to bridge the gaps that divide us unnecessarily?

Do we have the faith and the vision we need to cope with a runaway world of galloping progress and knowledge, where the limit is seemingly beyond the sky and where we appear, at least some of us, to be so close at the same time both to salvation and to destruction?

Inequality persists in our world. Whole societies are burdened with unbearable – or shall we say unsustainable – debts that continue to stand in the way of them moving forward in the quest for creating better conditions for their people. Let us join hands to surmount these obstacles unbecoming to humankind, human beings and human spirit!

UNESCO must continue to stand firm, and face these challenges; the challenges of ignorance, of poverty, and the challenges of the emerging information, knowledge and digital disparity. And finally and most importantly, UNESCO must face the challenges of learning to live together – in peace, with regard and respect for the other.

Our Organization also faces new ethical challenges, especially in the world of science and research. UNESCO must live up to its calling as a forum for open exchange, but also develop normative texts in that regard that will help guide action and behaviour in some of these issues.

While upholding the global vocation and value of our Organization, we see in the development of regional and subregional strategies for many programme areas, a useful instrument for a closer and more specific cooperation with Member States. In the African region, for example, a close link has been created between UNESCO and NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and the evolving cooperation may be a good example which could be emulated in other regions of the world.

Universality of action, universality of outreach, universality of spirit and of course, universality of membership will henceforth be our calling. It is a precious gift that we must nurture and cultivate every day – through international cooperation which, though often overlooked, remains the key mandate of our Organization. And so, we are delighted indeed to welcome our latest member, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, as it takes its place amongst us. We equally look forward to the return of the United States of America, which resumes its rightful place in this concert of nations which, as one of its founding Member States, they helped establish.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is by working together, with sincerity, humility and understanding that we can achieve the progress we all aspire; progress towards a fair, equitable and peaceful world, where everyone will be free, enabled and ennobled to contribute to the common good in his or her own way, but for the ultimate enrichment of all.

I am convinced that if we are true to the vision of UNESCO's founders, we can, through our united and sincere action, make these aspirations real and sustainable.

Once again, I thank you for your confidence in me and I assure you that I shall do everything in my power to fully merit the trust you have placed in me, to preside over the work of this historic 32nd session of the General Conference of our Organization.

I thank you all.