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(UNESCO)

at the opening of the general policy debate

UNESCO, 30 September 2003

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

Four years ago, on the brink of a new millennium and a new century, my inaugural address combined hope and determination in equal measure. Without being in the least complacent, I am broadly satisfied by what has been achieved thus far, as is the Executive Board. UNESCO enjoys a new vision, fresh relevance and heightened efficiency, all of which signify that a process of transformation has taken place – as I promised it would. And this has been widely recognized, not least by the United States of America whose return to membership of UNESCO is an acknowledgement of the success of our reform. There is more to do, of course, and that becomes clearer than ever as new challenges emerge.

Two years ago, at the last meeting of the General Conference, the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. were uppermost in our minds. Those tragic events signalled that a new era of global insecurity was opening but it was as yet unclear what the exact repercussions would be. What was clear was that the United Nations would need to address those repercussions or risk the charge of irrelevance. The General Conference's resolution on terrorism was a heartening affirmation of UNESCO's values, principles and commitment at that difficult time.

Today, another two years on, we face a difficult new situation. The United Nations is divided and deeply troubled. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, at the recent opening of the United Nations General Assembly, said that the United Nations has come to "a fork in the road", portending "a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the United Nations was founded".

At the same time, the United Nations is itself under direct physical attack as never before. Its long-standing enjoyment of respect by all sides has been shattered by the terrorist bomb that reduced the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad to rubble. There is no way of knowing where this will end but there is a palpable sense that a taboo has been breached, thus far with impunity.

The current crisis within the United Nations, focused largely on divisions over how questions of international security should be handled, is fuelling calls for radical reform. We must remember, however, that the United Nations is larger than the Security Council and that there are other issues, sometimes wrongly labelled "soft issues", that must remain on the agenda of the United Nations system as a whole. Many of these are issues that UNESCO is mandated by its Constitution to address. In our experience, these so-called "soft issues" can serve as useful entry-points into difficult situations or problems, enabling dialogue and cooperation to get started even when stalemate or conflict dominate the political agenda.

These considerations lead me to my first main task this morning, namely, to provide a global overview of where UNESCO stands today in relation to its place and role within the United Nations system. We are not without our critics and doubters, and I would be the first to say that there is much more to be done, but I firmly believe we are on track. Looking back over the last four years, two key developments have taken place.

First, UNESCO has clearly returned to full involvement with United Nations system processes. We have placed much emphasis on reinforcing our integration within the circuits of United Nations system collaboration and on engaging wholeheartedly with United Nations system issues. From the Millennium Development Goals to the Monterrey Consensus, from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq, UNESCO has sought to make useful contributions in accordance with its own themes and orientations. Gradually and steadily, we are proving ourselves as a good United Nations system partner.

Second, in so doing, UNESCO has slightly but perceptibly changed the approach of the United Nations system by playing what may be called its “petite musique” or, to use another metaphor, by adding its own spice to the casserole. By persuasion, by advocacy, by example and by persistence, UNESCO is influencing the United Nations system’s approach and, in the process, its contributions are being noticed and appreciated. Let me now offer some examples of how, by adding its distinctive voice, UNESCO is engaging more effectively and more visibly with important aspects of the global agenda.

In the field of education, the drive towards **Education for All** (EFA) dominates our action. Through the meetings of the High-Level Group, whose deliberations are informed by the widely-praised *EFA Global Monitoring Report*, and through a wide range of catalytic, partnership and coordination activities, UNESCO is acting as the conductor of the EFA orchestra, as it was called upon to do at the World Education Forum in Dakar. We have played a constructive and collaborative role in the development of new commitments such as the Fast-Track Initiative, while also highlighting the case of countries that do not fit within this framework of assistance and trying to help countries either in highest need or at greatest risk of not reaching the Dakar goals to develop sound national EFA plans.

At the same time, we are bringing our own vision to the pursuit of the six Dakar goals. In particular, the EFA goal of improving all aspects of the quality of education will receive UNESCO’s special attention. The forthcoming Ministerial Round Table on Quality Education provides a valuable opportunity for a high-level exchange of views on this crucial dimension of EFA.

Another example is the way UNESCO is addressing a top and urgent priority of the entire United Nations system, namely, combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This modern scourge has wrought havoc with the lives of millions around the world, and the worst is not yet over. UNESCO, a founding member of UNAIDS, is making its main contribution through its efforts to counter the epidemic’s impact on education systems and through its strategy of preventive education, which will be the thematic focus of meetings of the UNAIDS Committee of Co-sponsoring Organizations (CCO) this year, which I am chairing for the 12 months ending in June 2004. While gratified that our greater engagement with the UNAIDS process has been warmly welcomed by our partners, we remain acutely conscious that the efforts of the international community in general are still insufficient.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development held last year in Johannesburg, South Africa, was a landmark event for the entire United Nations system. I am proud of all of our contributions but I believe that our efforts in two particular areas will stand the test of time: first, our highlighting of the importance of education, which has culminated in the United Nations General Assembly’s decision to declare a United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and to request UNESCO to stimulate and coordinate international action for the Decade, and, second, our advocacy for the promotion and protection of cultural diversity as a key dimension of sustainable development.

The Johannesburg Summit witnessed the further rise of freshwater on the global agenda. As you know, on becoming Director-General, I made “freshwater and supporting ecosystems” the principal priority of the Natural Sciences Sector. I believe my judgement on this matter has been amply borne out by events. UNESCO’s action has been energetic, innovative and decisive. The World Water Assessment Programme, hosted by UNESCO, brings together 23 United Nations bodies and other partners in common endeavour. The first publication of the World Water Development Report in time for the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto earlier this year was a major success.

UNESCO is well positioned to contribute in a major way to United Nations-wide efforts concerning freshwater. The World Water Assessment Programme continues, its main task being the preparation and completion of the next *World Water Development Report* for the Fourth World Water Forum in 2006.

Turning now to another field in which the Organization has not only engaged with United Nations system processes but has also led the way towards new positions and understandings, UNESCO is playing a widely-acknowledged leadership role in the area of bioethics. We convened the first inter-agency meeting on bioethics, which was a useful complement of other international forums for which UNESCO is the coordinating agency. But we are doing more than coordination. UNESCO is shaping the whole United Nations system’s orientation regarding bioethics through its advocacy of an ethical approach towards cutting-edge developments in science and technology, especially in the life sciences. Thanks in no small part to UNESCO’s efforts, the need for this ethical prism is increasingly recognized.

Let me now turn to the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which takes place in Geneva in December. UNESCO has worked hard to ensure that the Summit not only deals with technological and infrastructural issues but also with a range of ethical, social, and cultural considerations. Our greatest concern has been to widen the Summit’s terms of debate, especially to insist that not only technological and economic forms of knowledge must be taken into account but also other forms and dimensions of knowledge rooted in community, culture and social identity. We have contested the very notion of “the information society”, preferring instead the concept of “knowledge societies” which, in our view, better captures the sense of building futures that are plural, variable and open to choice.

That is why during this General Conference there will be a Ministerial Round Table on the theme of “Towards Knowledge Societies”. On the eve of the Summit, furthermore, UNESCO will also hold a High-Level Symposium in Geneva and, during the Summit itself, four side events devoted to education, culture, science and media, which I hope many Ministers present today will also attend.

There are vital issues at stake and, on behalf of its Member States, UNESCO has sought to ensure that the Organization’s principles and concerns are fully represented in the Summit’s deliberations – especially freedom of expression, equal access to education, the development of a strong public domain of information, and the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, including multilingualism. We have undoubtedly influenced the terms of debate but there is much still to do, especially to guarantee freedom of expression as a core feature of knowledge societies. We look to Member States participating in the World Summit to ensure that this vital principle, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other core values are fully endorsed in the debates in Geneva.

For UNESCO, the cultivation of **dialogue among civilizations and among cultures** has become an area where we have now assumed the leading role in the United Nations system. This

became abundantly clear at the International Conference – “Dialogue among Civilizations: the Quest for New Perspectives” – held in New Delhi last July. Consolidating the outcomes of meetings held over the preceding three years, the New Delhi Conference generated a global perspective embracing the aims, foundations and principles of intercultural dialogue. Significantly, UNESCO was requested to initiate a broad-based collaboration among all key partners in order to translate proposals into concrete action.

The following month, the meeting in Ohrid, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, showed that regional and subregional forums of dialogue provide a golden opportunity to bring together high-level representatives to search for common ground through formal meetings and informal bilateral talks. By facilitating such encounters, UNESCO is opening up new avenues of communication which are crucial for building mutual confidence and understanding in a region where the scars of conflict are still healing.

In regard to the United Nations system’s response to the challenge of **terrorism**, last year’s “Report of the Secretary-General’s Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism” contained two recommendations – on education and science – of direct importance to UNESCO. Indeed, the Secretary-General called upon UNESCO to take the lead in these two areas. UNESCO is embedding these recommendations in its substantive work, not only in the areas of quality education and the ethics of science and technology but also communication. The Communication and Information Sector, for example, is facilitating the production of programmes to make the cultures of “the other” better known, to encourage tolerance and respect, and to promote dialogue between local and international journalists. Let me add that the General Conference’s Resolution on Terrorism is a vital reference point for all of our actions, especially its focus on addressing the conditions that provide fertile ground for the growth of terrorism.

Through these and other engagements, UNESCO is integrating its activities into the wider context of United Nations system priorities. And it is through this process that we are adapting ourselves to a changing world. A case in point is our stronger and more timely involvement in post-conflict situations, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries emerging from open conflict. We have not, of course, abandoned our primary orientation towards preventive action. Our perspective remains medium- and long-term in character but, on a selective basis and in line with the demands of particular circumstances, the early stages of post-conflict situations may present opportunities for addressing simultaneously prevention, reconciliation and reconstruction. We have clarified our strategic purposes and our terms of engagement, convinced that the multiplier effects of success will help to reinvigorate the Organization as an effective instrument of international cooperation and action.

The cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, though different in many respects, show that UNESCO can have a high profile within post-conflict situations. UNESCO’s educational programmes in such situations typically bring a long-term capacity-building perspective to bear upon systemic problems. UNESCO’s approach is to encourage responsible local ownership of the process of educational reconstruction; our experience in Afghanistan with the Afghan High Commission on Education is most promising.

As for culture, we are developing innovative mechanisms and strategies regarding culture and cultural heritage in post-conflict situations, such as the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage. We are convinced that cultural questions must be an integral part of the larger processes of reconstruction and reconciliation. There is growing acknowledgement not only among national authorities and local populations but also within the United Nations that UNESCO brings real added-value to international responses in this regard.

The situation in the **Middle East** reminds us all that the path to peace is strewn with obstacles. When the Quartet's "Road Map" process was launched, hopes were rekindled and UNESCO readied itself to contribute to the tasks of reconstruction and reconciliation. Unfortunately, violence has resumed. There is widespread disappointment at the recent turn of events. Nevertheless, the Road Map remains the only available framework for making progress. UNESCO believes that the doors of dialogue at all levels must be kept open – at the level of intergovernmental cooperation, at the level of government/civil society relations and, an area of particular interest to UNESCO, at the level of relations between civil societies. We shall continue to do all we can to foster such dialogue.

Mr President,

On the occasion of my inaugural address four years ago, I stressed what an exhilarating paradox UNESCO represents. Although it is not equipped to be an operational institution, it must nevertheless ensure that the global ethics of peace, justice and solidarity are both *morally observed and tangibly applied*.

Morally observed: this is a task to which the ongoing globalization processes have lent a new acuity, given that the need for common benchmarks, for freely and universally accepted principles, is being felt at a point where, as a result of current developments, the rules of the game are yet to be invented. By "rules of the game", I mean the frameworks within which States may fully exercise their sovereignty while participating in the adoption of a global and concerted position on the major international issues. We have made every effort in that direction in recent years, whether it be in the field of cultural heritage, cyberspace or bioethics – witness the large number of instruments which this session will have to examine – five in all – or on which it may wish to mandate UNESCO to work, such as measures to combat doping in sport or cultural diversity.

In that regard, I must express my satisfaction with the Executive Board's decision, at its last session, to suggest that you regard the preliminary draft convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage as a draft convention, thus giving you the opportunity, if you see fit, to adopt, at this present session, a convention whose importance and the need for which require no further demonstration. The intense work that has gone into it is now bearing fruit, and I welcome the fact that a consensus has been reached on a subject which, 12 months ago, was still some way from coming to fruition.

On the other hand, I must confess my concern at the divergence of views occurring over the issue of cultural diversity, in respect of which you will have to decide whether a standard-setting instrument is called for. At a time when all are agreed in recognizing the vital importance of cultural diversity for the future of humanity, at a time when the threats looming over it are increasingly imminent, I understand those States that wished, with a sense of urgency, to bring this issue to the attention of the General Conference. In so doing, they are carrying forward that great impetus which, only two years ago and in this same setting, led you to adopt, unanimously and by acclamation, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. I am concerned to note that antagonistic positions seem to be developing concerning a hypothetical instrument aimed at the protection of cultural contents and forms of artistic expression. I am reluctant to believe that such antagonism cannot be overcome, and that the dialogue for which I so much hope could fail to build, on such an important issue common positions addressing the concerns of all. Such will in any case be my sole objective, if you entrust me with the mandate I have asked of you.

Another instrument will require all of your attention: the international declaration on human genetic data. The non-binding text submitted to you is intended to set out ethical principles governing the collection, processing, use and storage of such data: respect for human dignity,

informed consent and confidentiality constitute its keystone. Intense consultation work has gone into its preparation, and it has received a wide measure of support, both from the group of governmental experts which met last June and from the Executive Board at its last session. I cannot overemphasize the urgency of adopting such a Declaration, since every day that passes brings with it its share of new experiences and initiatives, some of which can have irreversible consequences. Certain details still need to be addressed, and I am confident that the Working Group that should be set up shortly by Commission III will find the way – which seems to me close at hand – to consensus.

Mr President,

As I said a moment ago, our Organization must ensure that these common principles are not only recognized, but also tangibly applied, through appropriate strategies and policies and through more directly action-oriented programmes.

Paradoxically, in this era of globalization, it seems to be regional and subregional strategies that make it possible to home in most accurately on specific expectations and needs, and thus find suitable responses from which States and their populations may benefit. This is why efforts will be focused, in the forthcoming years, on the development of subregional strategies devised in the framework of the groups of countries (clusters) served by our field offices, so as better to attune our global objectives to the priorities and possibilities that exist on the ground.

Various subregional initiatives have already been launched lately: I am referring to the dialogue in south-east Europe, South-South cooperation among Portuguese-speaking countries, or again the cooperation between scientists in the Middle East and in neighbouring countries through the SESAME project, inaugurated in January of this year. Other such initiatives will shortly be launched for the Caucasus, the Pacific, the Caribbean, or the Great Lakes Region in Africa.

Africa indeed remains the priority continent for us and for the United Nations system as a whole. The strategy adopted in Ouagadougou in March 2003 at the international seminar “UNESCO and NEPAD: from vision to action”, a great gathering of political, economic and social decision-makers, clearly sets out the priorities for the period 2002 to 2007. The preservation and consolidation of peace, the combat against poverty, in particular through our efforts to achieve universal access to freshwater, preventive action against AIDS and, of course, education for all are key concerns we share with NEPAD and around which we are striving to augment the synergy of the efforts being undertaken by all those working for Africa. We have chosen realistic aims and practical activities which should, I hope, make it possible to provide a concrete and sustainable contribution in all those fields. The SIMDAS programme, a programme to promote integrated and sustainable management of arid and semi-arid regions in southern Africa which is being implemented by 14 countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), is also part of that approach. I will see to it that it gets substantial support as part of the implementation of document 32 C/5.

Such concrete results can be achieved on the desired scale only if we emphasize more clearly the profile of “honest broker” for which we are known in cooperation circles and in our international partnerships. By its very nature as a forum for dialogue between governmental and non-governmental actors, UNESCO has for many years been developing effective cooperation with various national and local partners which have joined together to form global networks, such as the Associated Schools Project or the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme network.

Globalization points to new possibilities for broadening such partnerships, which may radically change the impact of our action: it might involve parliamentarians, whose commitment, in

Africa and in Latin America, to education for all has already borne fruit; mayors, who have just held a meeting with a view to pooling their efforts for the reduction of natural disasters; or the private sector, which can play a decisive role in the success – or failure – of some of UNESCO's campaigns, for instance the Education for All campaign.

This highly diversified partnership network is thus shaping a “presence in the world” mode entirely different from that which prevailed for some 50 years, and in which the concept of the “Organization” expands into something greater than a Secretariat, no matter how decentralized. I am thinking in particular of the extraordinary burgeoning of regional and international centres for capacity-building in science, technology, education or culture which have sought to come under UNESCO's auspices in recent years and which are reinventing the way in which UNESCO may fulfil its primary mission of capacity-building.

This notion of “network” and even of a “network of networks”, which is gradually transforming our understanding of international action, and in particular that of UNESCO, is closely tied to the development of the new information and communication technologies. These technologies, the frame on which the knowledge societies emerging right before our eyes are built, represent a new deal for UNESCO in its capacity-building mission. Here again, its role as “honest broker” between existing supply and potential demand – in the fields of education and distance learning, scientific cooperation, cultural expression and cultural dialogue – can be played to the full. UNESCO has already acted as an intermediary between universities and science centres in the North and the South by helping to make available educational and scientific electronic equipment to which it grants its seal of quality. It has done similar work in the field of literary translation, bringing together through an interactive Web portal all the professionals concerned (translators, editors, sponsors), thus promoting intercultural dialogue on a practical level.

These are, it is true, profiles, which must be approached with caution but which offer richly promising prospects.

Mr President,

This ambition that I cherish for the Organization can only be achieved if its methods of work and ways of operating are adapted to its main tasks as well as to the new profile it presents on the international stage. The internal reform that I have undertaken over the last four years has had no other end in view.

These past years have been mainly devoted to correcting what I would call the “errors of the past”. That has now been done, and we are entering a new and more dynamic phase, where the task ahead will be to equip UNESCO to respond more effectively to the challenges of the future.

The efforts undertaken to concentrate the programme on clear priorities with a matching strengthening of budgetary and human resources have enabled us to recover, in certain clearly defined areas, a leading role. The emphasis deliberately placed on an interdisciplinary approach casts a new light, more complex but also more coherent, on our strategies.

A results-based management system has now been initiated, with a clearer definition of the objectives, objectives that are intended to be both more realistic and more specific. Purpose-adapted computerized tools for the management of the programme and budget have now been put in place and are gradually coming into use in the Secretariat.

A system for the delegation of authority, which still requires some adjustments, is gradually being implemented. The corollary of this is a strengthened internal oversight system, to the

efficiency of which the External Auditors have paid tribute, as did the Executive Board at its last session.

However, two major ongoing operations remain unfinished.

The first concerns staff policies, which are of the utmost importance for the smooth functioning of the Secretariat. We have undertaken, for the first time in the history of the Organization, a complete review of all aspects of those policies, including recruitment and rotation, performance evaluation and promotion, training and career development. A coherent, modernized corpus of policies has thus been introduced on the basis of a broad process of consultation. It now remains to ensure its implementation, which will become fully effective in 2004-2005.

The second unfinished job in hand is that of decentralization. It is also of fundamental importance if our action on a global scale is to be fully applied on a local level. Four years ago, when I assumed office, the need for such a reform was obvious. It has not been easy to build, on the existing basis, a system that is both rational and satisfactory to all. Much effort, in political and diplomatic terms, has been put into this, not only on my part but also on yours.

I have spared no effort, within the budgetary limits imposed upon me, to rationalize our network in the field and give meaning to the concept of clusters which I have established and which is, I am convinced, the most coherent one and the one best able to meet the objectives of our new vision of the programme. In doing this, I am aware, however, of only having gone halfway. It would have been unrealistic to believe that we could advance more rapidly, when the new configuration of the field network was finalized only two years ago. That I have been able to reach this point is due to your cooperation, which remains vital for the continuation of this process.

The current situation, as was clear from the recent debates in the Executive Board, must still be regarded as transitional. A number of corrective measures are called for, some of which are already under way. But the situation must on no account give rise to discouragement. A comprehensive plan of action, with an accompanying timetable, will soon be ready, and we shall undertake a full review of the exercise in 2004-2005. Rest assured I shall be relentless in my efforts to ensure the success of this strategy, since the overall credibility of UNESCO and its ability to achieve concrete results depend thereon.

Mr President,

The Executive Board, which has been my constant companion in my efforts over these four years, has clearly expressed its satisfaction at the ground so far covered, and its new-found confidence. That is for me, as you can imagine, a source of great satisfaction, given that this programme of reform has entailed its share of difficult decisions and necessary sacrifices. It is a path that we have followed together, which would not have been possible without the support of, and the close cooperation that has been established with, the Member States as a whole.

The Executive Board's decision to recommend to the General Conference that it adopt a budgetary ceiling of \$610 million – which represents, for the first time after several years of restriction, a modest real growth – is also evidence of this new-found confidence. Everyone stands to gain thereby, for which we can only be glad: the Organization, of course, which will have more resources to carry out its tasks, but also the Member States which, as a result of the new share-out of budget contributions resulting from the return of the United States of America, will see a reduction in their contributions.

Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very time when the United Nations system is going through probably the most serious crisis in its history, at the very time when the face of the world and the keys to understanding and governing it seem so uncertain, UNESCO is gaining each day a little more status and respect in the international arena.

One of its founder members, the United States of America, has decided to return to the fold, after 19 years' absence. The youngest nation in the world, Timor-Leste, has chosen, as one of its first acts of international policy, to join it.

All this has a meaning on which we need to reflect. It is clearly the sign of a new-found confidence, of restored credibility and of renewed hope, but it cannot be only that.

Since the subjects that come before us and the areas where we act are not directly political, we may be exempt from the tensions that crystallize around the current major political issues.

Since our methods of work cast us in the role of honest broker and anchorperson in a frank and open dialogue between all the actors, both governmental and non-governmental, we often manage to reconcile different interests and to bring out new opportunities for cooperation and mutual understanding in specific fields.

Since, in so doing, we give universality its true face, that of pluralism, reflecting the world as it really is, one in its diversity, we may hope that this new-found universality is the outcome of a determination – or at least of a hope – that multilateralism will find within UNESCO its fullest meaning, which would bestow upon us immense responsibilities and fill me with pride.

It is on this note that I should like to conclude, leaving you the floor so that you may express this diversity and, I hope, this shared vision which gives us the right, all of us together, to look to the future with confidence and serenity.