

DG/2004/011  
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the meeting of Ministers of Education  
of the Pacific sub-region

Apia, Samoa, 29 January 2004

Honourable Ministers of Education,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Apia, Samoa, and an honour to have this opportunity to address you at this meeting of Pacific Ministers of Education. I would like to thank the Prime Minister of Samoa, the Honourable Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, for accepting to host this meeting and my special thanks go to the Samoan authorities, in particular, the Minister of Education, Sports and Culture, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, for providing such a warm welcome and for all their assistance to UNESCO in the preparation of this meeting.

This is an important meeting for advancing the educational agenda of the Member States of the Pacific sub-region. UNESCO recognizes that the small island states of the Pacific face a unique set of educational challenges that must be met if these nations – that are so economically, environmentally and culturally vulnerable – are to build a sustainable future. All of us gathered here today are united in the conviction that raising the quality of education, especially basic education, will be a crucial task in the period ahead.

This meeting is both timely and important in UNESCO's perspective. At this time, I am making strong efforts to encourage closer linkage between the global level of Education for All (EFA) coordination, mobilization and advocacy and the intermediary level of regional and sub-regional EFA fora. Earlier this month, I undertook a mission to Africa where I opened three conferences of Ministers of Education, organized by UNESCO, which focused on specific regional or sub-regional groupings. I believe that such groupings, including this one being held in Apia, are vital for translating the global deliberations and recommendations of the High-Level Group on EFA into strategies attuned to the realities of local situations and actions supportive of national efforts and priorities. Above all, the regional and sub-regional dimension of EFA provides a domain where Member States, development partners, UN agencies, civil society and education professionals can share ideas and experience and pool their resources. I am happy to note that the Minister of Education, Sports and Culture of Samoa, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, is a regular participant in the High-Level Group meeting, thus establishing a close link between the Global EFA agenda and the Pacific EFA process.

UNESCO, through its Apia Office, has sought to be a catalyst of this process and this meeting is one sign of its success in this regard. Much credit must go to the Director of the UNESCO Apia Office, Edna Tait, who has worked tirelessly to promote educational development and coordination across the sub-region. Edna will be retiring shortly and she certainly will be a hard act to follow. She has done a

marvellous job not only for UNESCO but also for its Member States in the Pacific. I am sure you will agree with me that she has made a real difference.

I am delighted to announce to you that I have decided to appoint Martin Hadlow as the next Director of the UNESCO Apia Office. A professional of wide experience who knows both UNESCO and the sub-region very well, Martin will assume his duties soon. I am confident that he will continue the excellent work done by Edna. In the Organization's new decentralization strategy, the key is the cluster office and its ability to serve a number of states with expertise drawing upon the full range of UNESCO's fields of competence. Each cluster office also benefits from the cooperation and advice of the relevant UNESCO Regional Office. I am therefore very pleased that Sheldon Shaeffer, the Director of the Regional Education Office in Bangkok, Thailand, is with us and has contributed to this ministerial meeting.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now offer some reflections on the importance of EFA action in the Pacific sub-region. I am pleased to acknowledge that countries in the sub-region have made earnest efforts in recent years to come to terms with the EFA agenda. It is also gratifying that UNESCO has convened sub-regional meetings, at both ministerial and technical levels, and has encouraged collaboration among all EFA partners.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report has quickly established itself as a key tool of the whole EFA movement, providing cogent argumentation and analysis along with useful presentations of educational data. Though hosted and supported by UNESCO, the EFA Global Monitoring Report is editorially independent. Its 2003/04 edition is focused on gender equality in education, which is the subject of the first Dakar deadline to occur, namely, the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. Copies of the Report have been made available to you, therefore I shall not enter into detail on the overall analysis. Instead, I shall draw your attention to selected aspects of particular relevance to the Pacific sub-region.

According to the 2003/04 Report, most of the general trends are positive as far as the quantitative aspects of EFA improvement are concerned in the Pacific sub-region. Literacy levels, for example, are quite high; furthermore, many countries are doing well as far as access to and gender parity in primary education are concerned. However, a significant feature is that, in several countries, it is boys rather than girls who are falling behind. Some countries do need to address such issues as under-enrolment of boys in early childhood care and education, the greater tendency of boys to repeat and the under-enrolment of boys in secondary education. But the trends are not uniform: in other countries, boys outnumber girls in secondary education. Moreover, the greater proportion of girls enrolment in secondary and post-secondary

education in several countries is offset by gender stereotyping in regard to fields of study and the career prospects available.

In quantitative terms, therefore, there are positive general trends but also particular localized patterns of disparity rooted in cultural traditions and customs as well as certain influences arising from urbanization, population growth and economic marginalization. Educational measures to address these specific situations need to be tailored to local circumstances.

The question of quality education will be taken up specifically by the next EFA Global Monitoring Report, which will be used by the High-Level Group on EFA in its deliberations in Brasilia next November. We do note that there already exists a general concern that the quality of the education received by children and young people in the Pacific islands needs to receive greater attention. This concern for improving quality is evident in the work of the Pacific Islands Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP) and the South Pacific Board of Educational Assessment (SPBEA). It is also at the heart of the Pacific Regional Initiative for Developing Education (PRIDE). I am pleased that UNESCO Apia has been closely involved in these important sub-regional mechanisms and initiatives.

With regard to PRIDE, UNESCO welcomes the important contributions of New Zealand and the European Union. The EU's contribution is most significant for the sub-region, while the enhanced level of initial support from New Zealand is proving most helpful in getting the project off the ground. We have cooperated in the development of this initiative and serve on its Advisory Committee. The emphasis on improving the competence in basic skills among young people, especially aimed at enhancing their employment prospects, highlights the link between quality, relevance and effective learning. The PRIDE project also includes a capacity-building dimension in terms of helping Pacific island countries to improve their ability to deliver quality basic education through formal and nonformal modalities. I am certain that this project will play a vital role in stimulating EFA improvements in the sub-region in coming years.

Implementation of the PRIDE project is in the hands of the University of the South Pacific, in particular its Institute of Education. Let me assure you of two things. First, UNESCO will continue to work closely with all partners involved in the project. Second, we shall seek to ensure that our own actions are compatible and harmonized with PRIDE.

In this regard, let me briefly mention two extrabudgetary projects, supported by Japanese Funds-in-Trust, that UNESCO will undertake in the sub-region. One of these projects has already been approved and launched while the other is awaiting finalization and donor approval. The first is the "teacher status project", whose full

title is “Capacity-Building for Human Resources: Promotion of the Status of Teachers in the Pacific through Distance Education and Participatory Consultation”. Prepared by the UNESCO Apia Office, this project will help teachers to enhance their status through the acquisition or improvement of academic qualifications and teaching skills. Also included in the project is the establishment of national consultative mechanisms involving Ministries of Education and teachers, and the promotion of teachers’ professional status throughout the sub-region. We believe that teachers are at the heart of all effective approaches towards improving the quality of basic education. In implementing this \$250,000 project, we will work closely with our counterparts and partners.

The second project, also for \$250,000 project, will be devoted to the training of South Pacific statisticians. The Director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), Denise Lievesley, has already mentioned this project, in which case I shall not go into further detail. However, I would like to emphasize the importance of strengthening statistical capacity in the Pacific islands, as a basis for generating and distributing reliable educational data that can inform both policy-making and educational practice.

With regard to quality education, I must also mention other UNESCO modalities of support and encouragement. These include the Associated School Project network (ASPnet), which is going from strength to strength in the sub-region. Since it became actively involved in ASPnet in 1997, Samoa has some 75 participating schools. Papua New Guinea has 31, Tonga has 20, and the Cook Islands have 12. Indeed, all of the 16 Pacific island Member States of UNESCO have ASPnet schools. This is an important platform for introducing curricular innovations and improvements in teaching.

Let me also add at this point the importance of the UNEVOC network in the Pacific sub-region., where there are 18 UNEVOC centres. The seminar held at the Apia UNEVOC centre in June 2003 brought together a number of participants from Member States and helped to reinforce their contacts and collaboration. Given the high importance of generating training and employment opportunities for youth in the Pacific islands, and given the need to strengthen Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) capacities in Member States, the UNEVOC network certainly has a key role to play in the development of quality education, building on the foundations laid by basic education.

In closing my remarks to you today, let me assure you that UNESCO is determined to extend and improve its services and support to Member States in the Pacific sub-region. The enhancement of quality basic education is a fundamental task for us all. Through our capacity-building efforts and our partnerships with other agencies and Member States, we plan to facilitate real improvements in the period

ahead. To this end, I am strengthening the staffing base of the Apia cluster office, which is the centre of our operations in the sub-region. In addition, I shall ask the Regional Office and the relevant Institutes and Centres within the UNESCO domain to step up their contacts and active engagement with the sub-region, especially in the field of education.

It remains for me to wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you.