

DG/2005/034  
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 opening session of the conference  
“The United States, UNESCO and Education for All”

Georgetown University, Washington DC, 28 February 2005

First Lady Laura Bush,  
Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings,  
President John DeGioia of Georgetown University,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Honoured Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and pleasure to be with you here today. As the co-host of this one-day conference, let me join with President DeGioia in welcoming each and all of you. Allow me also to express my sincere thanks to President DeGioia for the kind remarks in his Opening Address. It has been a pleasure to work closely with Georgetown University in organizing this conference. We very much appreciate the warm hospitality we have received.

It is a signal honour that our meeting will be addressed by the two leading women on the educational landscape of the United States today, First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. I look forward very much to the thoughts you will share with us this morning.

I must say that the three elements in the title of this conference - “The United States, UNESCO and Education for All” – does sound like a most appropriate and positive combination. It has been made possible by the return of the United States to membership in UNESCO after a gap of nearly two decades, which has made a world of difference because it brought back true universality to the Organization. Since rejoining UNESCO, the United States has entered seriously and purposively into our work in many fields. Much of the credit for this is owed to Ambassador Louise Oliver, whose vigorous and constructive engagement with key issues and processes has been outstanding and influential. Like the United Nations as a whole, UNESCO needs the United States because we know that, with its support, expertise and encouragement, we can do so much more to fulfil our mandate.

Today, we will discuss the important role that colleges and universities in the United States can play in achieving the goals of Education for All (EFA), a challenge that is at the very heart of UNESCO’s work. The conference will also explore how the higher education community can work with the private sector towards achieving EFA. Knowing that different aspects of EFA will be further developed during the meeting, I will give you a general overview of what EFA is about, what UNESCO’s role in EFA consists of and how we are trying to extend the partnership base of EFA.

Sixty years ago, the “founding fathers” who wrote the UNESCO Constitution had the wisdom and foresight to include in its Preamble a provision whereby the

signatory states affirm their belief in “full and equal opportunities for education for all”.

The current world focus on EFA dates from the World Education Conference held in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, which highlighted that the universal right to education was not enjoyed by millions of children and adults around the world. Ten years after Jomtien, in spite of notable progress in some countries towards achieving universal primary education and adult literacy, the World Education Forum held in 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, found that many countries were still far from achieving EFA. The 181 governments participating in the Forum adopted a Framework for Action that emphasized the need for quality basic education and universal access to it. The Dakar Forum set six goals for achieving Education for All by 2015 and outlined a strategy for achieving them.

EFA is focused on basic education, which embraces the following: early childhood care and education; universal primary education of good quality for all children, boys and girls; learning and life-skills programmes for all young people and adults; literacy programmes, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults; gender equality in education, including the removal of gender disparities in primary and secondary education; and improving all aspects of the quality of education.

It is clearly an ambitious agenda and yet, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is at once shameful and astonishing that so many children, young people and adults have few or no educational opportunities. According to current estimates, about 800 million adults, two-thirds of them women, have no command of basic literacy skills. Over 103 million school-age children are out-of-school, surely destined to join the ranks of the non-literate. And for many of those who do manage to gain access to education, it is often low in quality and bestows no enduring level of literacy skills or other accomplishments. Basic education, furthermore, is riven by gender disparities and other dimensions of disadvantage, usually linked to poverty and marginalization.

As things stand, the world is not on track to achieve the EFA goals by 2015. Only 83 countries, together covering just over one-third of the world’s population, have already achieved the goals of universal primary education, gender parity and literacy -- or have a high chance of doing so by 2015. If current trends continue unchanged, without significant new policy interventions, a further 28 countries, accounting for 28% of the world’s population, are not on track to achieve any of these three goals. Two-thirds of those countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, but they also include countries like India and Pakistan. By current trends, 79 countries will not be able to meet the Dakar goal of halving their adult illiteracy rates by 2015.

But the enormity of the challenge must not be allowed to daunt us. Progress is possible and, in many countries, real progress is being made.

The primary responsibility for achieving EFA lies with national governments. In Dakar, all countries committed themselves to developing national plans for education for all and to boosting investment in basic education, and the international community made in return the significant commitment that “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources”. In effect, EFA is a global educational compact.

UNESCO’s EFA mandate, as entrusted to the Organization at the Dakar Forum in 2000, embodies a dual commitment. UNESCO’s role is to coordinate EFA partners and maintain their collaborative momentum, and also to refocus its programme in order to place the outcomes and priorities of Dakar at the heart of its work. How best to implement this dual commitment has been a continuing challenge for UNESCO in the five years since the Dakar conference. EFA is today not only the main priority of UNESCO’s Education Sector, with about 80% of its budget dedicated to EFA; it is the principal priority of the whole Organization.

UNESCO is also responsible for monitoring progress towards the six EFA goals. UNESCO annually publishes an *EFA Global Monitoring Report* produced by an independent team of experts hosted by UNESCO. The theme of the next report, which will be launched in November this year, will be literacy.

Each year I convene a High-Level Group on EFA which serves as a lever for political commitment and technical and financial resource mobilization. The High-Level Group, which next meets in Beijing, China, in November, is composed of four key EFA constituencies: first, the governments of developing countries, typically represented by Ministers of Education; second, bilateral development partners or donors such as USAID; third, UN agencies and other international organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank; and fourth, civil society organizations such as leading international, regional or national NGOs, including the Global Campaign for Education, the main organizer of EFA Action Week. By the way, EFA Action Week this year (in the week beginning 25 April) will focus on education to end poverty and empower women, under the slogan “Send my friend to school”.

Note should also be made of two United Nations decades on education, one on literacy (2003-2012) and the other on education for sustainable development (2005-2014), for both of which UNESCO is responsible for international coordination. Tomorrow, in fact, I shall launch the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development at UN headquarters in New York.

UNESCO's own programmatic thrusts are being channeled through three new initiatives: the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE); the Teacher Training in Sub-Saharan Africa Initiative; and the Global Initiative on HIV/AIDS and Education.

UNESCO is also actively seeking to broaden and deepen the partnerships and alliances within the EFA movement by bringing in new or under-represented partners. A case in point is the private sector. For example, a round table on "Development-Driven Public-Private Partnerships in Basic Education" was organized by the Davos World Economic Forum and UNESCO at the High-Level Group meeting in Brasilia last November. The second round table will be held in Paris in April 2005, which I will open. This initiative is a promising avenue for establishing regular dialogue and cooperation between the more traditional EFA stakeholders and the business community.

I am very pleased that one of the break-out panels this afternoon is dedicated to the theme of "How the private sector can partner with universities to help achieve EFA". This evening, let me add, I shall be attending the "UNESCO and Business Dinner" organized by the Committee for Economic Development (CED). This will be a marvelous opportunity for dialogue between UNESCO and key representatives of the US private sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference is an important opportunity for UNESCO and the American higher education community to renew their acquaintance. I firmly believe that we have many areas of common interest but I am particularly pleased that this first major rendezvous between us is focused on EFA. This is, by far and away, the highest priority on the world's education agenda.

The key outcome I seek is your commitment, expressed in actions and programmes, to help developing countries overcome the obstacles they face in the area of basic education. I believe that the vibrant civil society of the United States – the only superpower, a country that has built its progress on educational foundations – can do more, much more, to help less fortunate countries achieve their educational goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education is the new frontier and it is global in scope. EFA needs your help. The children without schools or teachers need your help. The women who cannot read and write need your help. The young people without skills and qualifications need your help.

Therefore, I call upon your assistance and expertise, your partnership and networking, your energy and dynamism, and your enhanced and sustained support for the sake of those who live on the frontiers of ignorance, poverty and despair. You can help in so many ways – in teacher education and training; in conducting and sharing the benefits of educational research; in linking up with sister institutions in poorer countries; in projects to help HIV/AIDS orphans or the victims of natural disasters. There is so much that needs to be done to achieve the EFA goals and, believe me, the world needs the help of the United States and its people.

I hope that, through today's meeting, you will find out more about how UNESCO and other EFA partners can help you engage with the EFA challenge. Naturally, I would be delighted if, as a consequence of this meeting, the relations between UNESCO and American universities and colleges were to deepen and develop around the theme of EFA. But my main interest is less self-interested. What I really wish is that the American higher education community takes the global challenge of EFA to its heart. UNESCO stands ready to facilitate this process of engagement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great privilege and pleasure to introduce this morning the Opening Keynote Speaker, Mrs Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States. It was a very proud moment for my Organization when, in September 2003, Mrs Bush joined us in Paris to mark the return of the United States to membership in UNESCO. Mrs Bush clearly has a strong commitment to education and I think that this has deep roots in her love of children, her love of books and her passionate belief in the power of learning to change lives for the better. UNESCO, the specialized United Nations agency for education, recognizes a kindred spirit in the First Lady. Her national reading initiative "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn", her promotion of teacher recruitment, her support for education campaigns to combat breast cancer and heart disease, and her international role as the UNESCO Honorary Ambassador for the Decade of Literacy – these and other actions and involvements reveal her to be a true leader in the field of education. Mrs Bush, we are most honoured by your presence here today. I am now delighted to call upon you to deliver your Opening Keynote Address.