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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the conference on education

Baku, 24 August 2005

Mrs Aliyeva, First Lady of Azerbaijan,
Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister of Education,
UNDP Resident Representative,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to participate in the opening of this conference on education, which marks an important moment for Azerbaijan, and also for UNESCO's cooperation with your country. I warmly thank the First Lady of Azerbaijan, Mrs Meyriban Aliyeva, whose energy and devotion have done a great deal to bring the concerns of your country to UNESCO. We all know of her excellent work in culture, but her interest in the improvement of education is no less fruitful. I also wish to thank the Minister of Education, Mr Missir Mardanov, who did much to launch this initiative through discussions in Paris and who has ably organized this timely conference.

This is my second trip to Azerbaijan, at the invitation of the President, Mr Ilhan Aliyev, and the First Lady. Five years ago I was invited by the late President, Heydar Aliyev, for the celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the epic poem "Kitab-i Dede Qorqud". When I visited the Heydar Aliyev Foundation just before I came here, I was delighted to see there a photograph of myself with the late President.

Our cultural cooperation will be highlighted in this second visit, as I am fortunately scheduled to see the Old City of Baku World Heritage Site, and the sites of Gobustan and Atashgyakh, which are on Azerbaijan's Tentative List of potential nominations to the World Heritage List. I will also visit two of your major cultural foundations, "Friends of Azerbaijani Culture" and "Heydar Aliyev", both chaired by the First Lady, Mrs Aliyeva. And I will attend the laying of the foundation stone for the Mugham Centre. Mugham, the traditional classical music of Azerbaijan, was recognized in 2003 as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, a programme of UNESCO.

However, education is one of the key concerns during my trip. We wish to broaden our efforts, which means going further than the existing cooperation in technical and vocation education and in ICTs for education, in which two of our specialized bodies – the UNEVOC Centre in Bonn and ITTE in Moscow - have already been active.

As you know, UNESCO has a leading international role for such global initiatives as Education for All (EFA). One of the Dakar goals is to improve every aspect of the quality of education, and the 2005 EFA monitoring report of UNESCO is entitled "The Quality Imperative". Another task, closely linked to EFA, is the

mandate of the Organization in the promotion of Education for Sustainable Development. In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed that the period 2005 to 2014 would be the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), and UNESCO was designated as the lead agency. We are presently preparing a fully-fledged Action Plan for this Decade.

The overall goal of DESD is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning in order to encourage changes in behaviour that allow for a more sustainable, economically viable and just society for all. Ultimately, the goal is to create a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. We believe that Azerbaijan will be a key partner in this process, particularly through its own initiatives to improve quality education and strive towards assuring Education for Sustainable Development.

On 5 May of this year your President, Mr Ilham Aliyev, set up an Education Commission endowed with a mandate of the first order. Its task is to improve the quality of education in the light of new developments taking place around the world. To do this, it must also identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Azerbaijan education system, and consider the different options for improvement.

Only a few weeks later, on 6 July, and precisely to signal our commitment to support the Government, UNESCO sponsored in Paris a Conference organized by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan on the “Reform of the Education System in Azerbaijan for a Sustainable Future”. It was a signal opportunity for UNESCO, and more specifically, its Education sector, to learn about the reform initiatives and measures that Azerbaijan has already taken to improve its education system, especially regarding the quality of education. On this occasion, there were in-depth discussions on important reform issues in Azerbaijan such as teacher education, equity in educational provision, technical and vocational education, ICTs in education, and also sector planning and management capacities.

Despite various difficulties over the past years, your country has maintained high literacy rates and high school enrolments. Indeed, many basic indicators in education are very positive, yet the Ministry of Education has identified several urgent problems relating to the quality of education which, unless they are corrected now, risk having long-term detrimental effects on the country’s education system and its economic development. Some studies show that school attendance is tending to decrease, especially in secondary education; the quality of the learning environment has deteriorated in some areas; teaching and learning methods need to be updated. Lack of ICTs in education constitutes yet another challenge.

In recent years, Azerbaijan has conducted sound macroeconomic policies and its investments in its oil fields have yielded promising results. It is estimated that over the next five years, the GDP will triple. The proper utilization of oil revenues will become one of the biggest development challenges in Azerbaijan, as it has been elsewhere, and I believe that it can be met by investing this increased national wealth into developing human capacity. The high-level and visible commitment of the country's leaders, beginning with President Aliyev himself, is the strongest signal in the effort towards better educational provision for all. A transparent sector policy and wider involvement of stakeholders will be keys to progress and development.

At this conference, UNESCO is keen to hear more about the actions that Azerbaijan has carried out for education reform and to continue the discussions we started in Paris on future cooperation. As the international coordinator for EFA and the lead United Nations agency for the promotion of the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, and in conformity with our mandate to support national education reform and development, UNESCO will provide all possible support to help make your reform policy a success. In the light of our recent discussions, UNESCO will sign a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Azerbaijan Government that will address the following priority areas:

- Strategic planning and management of education;
- Promotion of equal access to education;
- Quality education through teacher training and curriculum development at all levels of education;
- Basic and vocational technical skills;
- ICTs in education;
- International cooperation for education.

I have also decided to field soon a UNESCO identification mission to Baku in order to assess the status of educational reform and prepare with the Ministry of Education a joint sector assessment report, specifying the areas for UNESCO's contribution.

I have no doubt that today you will have in-depth discussions on the past achievements that can be built upon, the problems that must be remedied, and the proposals that will be most viable for furthering the education reform agenda. I look forward to hearing about the results of this Conference, which will give us useful indications for designing UNESCO's future support and strengthening our cooperation in these vital domains for Azerbaijan.

Thank you.