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**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion
of World AIDS Day**

1 December 2008

The world is, at last, making some real progress in its response to AIDS, confirmed in the *UNAIDS 2008 Report on the global AIDS epidemic*. Member States are acting on their promises made at the 2006 United Nations High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS, to scale up towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010. A number of countries are already providing universal access to life-prolonging antiretroviral treatment and to other vital services, and more countries are well on their way to doing so. A six-fold increase in financing for HIV activities in low- and medium-income countries since 2000 is yielding results, including a decline in the annual number of AIDS deaths in the past two years from 2.2 million in 2005 to 2 million in 2007. In a number of heavily affected countries – such as Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe – dramatic changes in sexual behaviour have brought declines in the number of new HIV infections, contributing to a global stabilization in the percentage of people aged 15-49 infected with HIV.

Much of this progress can be traced to the discovery of the virus that causes AIDS, an achievement acknowledged by the award of this year's Nobel Prize for Medicine to the co-discoverers of HIV, including Professor Luc Montagnier who has had a long association with UNESCO. The identification of HIV was a prerequisite for the antiretroviral treatment we have available today, as well as improved prevention strategies.

Twenty-seven years into the epidemic, however, AIDS continues to challenge all of our efforts. For every two people who start taking antiretroviral drugs, another five become newly infected. There is a risk that important progress achieved in recent years might lull some into complacency. Unless we maintain and strengthen steps to intensify HIV prevention, we will fail to sustain the gains of the past few years, and universal access will not be realized.

The theme of this year's World AIDS Day is about 'keeping the promise', the promise made through the Declaration of Commitment by UN Member States in 2006 to work towards achieving universal access. The Declaration established a number of targets, including the key goal of ensuring that by 2010 95% of young people aged 15-24 have comprehensive knowledge about HIV and about how to avoid transmission. It is of great concern, however, that last year only 40% of males and 38% of females in this age group had reached this vital level of knowledge. Some countries report even more alarming gaps in knowledge. For example, in Somalia only 4% of young women aged 15-24 report accurate knowledge of HIV. This is very far from the agreed target, and is a wake-up call for the urgency of providing good quality education for all. Numerous studies show that, with the right information and skills, young people can change their behaviour to reduce the risk of acquiring HIV infection or passing it on to others. In countries where HIV prevention education has been strong, the evidence shows that young people are far more likely to delay the age when they start sexual relationships and to use condoms in those sexual relationships. Such shifts in behaviour are contributing to global progress against the epidemic, but much more needs to be done.

On the eve of this year's 17th International AIDS Conference in Mexico, I wrote an article published in several major newspapers in the region and posted on UNESCO's website, arguing for the important role school-based education can play in preparing children and young people for their adult roles and responsibilities. Since in most countries young people between the ages of five and thirteen spend relatively large amounts of time in school, schools provide a practical means of reaching large numbers of young people with education on HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, in many countries young people will have their first sexual experiences while enrolled in education, making the school setting even more important as an opportunity to provide education about sexual and reproductive

health. We must remember that over 75% of all HIV infections occur through sexual transmission, so we must not pass up this vital opportunity for schools to play their full role in the national response to the epidemic.

There are challenges to providing evidence-based and age-appropriate education on sex, relationships and HIV. In particular, a damaging misconception persists that teaching young people about sex will encourage them to start experimenting sexually, when the evidence demonstrates that the opposite is true. Good quality comprehensive sex education can lead to a reduction in teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV.

It is heartening to see more countries taking action to address the HIV and AIDS knowledge gap among young people. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Ministers of Health and Education in Latin America and the Caribbean held their first ever meeting to halt the spread of HIV in the region at the beginning of August 2008. They adopted an ambitious and wide-ranging Declaration committing themselves to deliver comprehensive sex education throughout the region, keeping their promise of ensuring that young people have the right to HIV prevention education. It now remains for the rest of the world to commit to similar action. UNESCO and all the other UNAIDS cosponsors have pledged their full support to efforts in this direction.

As the world commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we would do well to recall the right of everyone to lead healthy and productive lives free from disease. We must also remember the many millions of people who have lost their lives to AIDS due to a preventable infection. Sex education is imperative for HIV prevention to be fully effective. Access to sex, relationships and HIV/STI education can help young people make more informed decisions and become better able to exercise their human rights. It may even save their lives.



Koïchiro Matsuura