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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony
of the Forty-eighth session
of the International Conference on Education**

Geneva, 25 November 2008

Madam Chairperson,
Honourable Ministers of Education,
Honourable Heads of Delegations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all to the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE).

I wish, first of all, to thank you Madam Chair for your stimulating opening address. Let me once again congratulate India for having presided so successfully the 47th ICE session, focused on quality education, which I had the pleasure to attend in September 2004.

I would also like to express my warmest thanks to the Swiss Federal authorities and to the Republic and Canton of Geneva for the generous hospitality they have always offered to this Conference and to the International Bureau of Education (IBE), which has been organizing the ICE sessions since 1934.

Let me take this opportunity to wish the IBE an early happy 80th birthday for next year. The IBE was the first intergovernmental body specialized in education to be born, and has been an integral part of UNESCO for 40 years.

These ICE sessions are a necessity in our globalized world, where it is crucial to have platforms that enable genuine dialogue on the future course of education. The theme of this 48th session, "Inclusive Education, The Way of the Future", is more

than timely. All ministers of education know that lack of knowledge, skills and competences is increasingly a cause of exclusion and of social tension. The presence of so many important stakeholders here today further reflects the fact that education is a societal project that cannot be achieved without broad partnerships. So let me warmly welcome ministers of education along with all the partners present today.

Time does not allow me to thank each and everyone who has contributed to this Conference. Let me at least thank the governments of Ecuador, India, Kuwait, Spain and Switzerland, all other governments and institutions that have collaborated in producing a series of videos, as well as UNICEF and the Fund of the Project of Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia.

We can say that this conference actually began nearly two years ago, with thirteen preparatory meetings that drew more than 900 participants from 128 countries. I would like to express my gratitude to all those who collaborated in the organization of these meetings, whose outcomes will shape debates over the next days. Let me also thank the private sponsors, NGOs and UN agencies that have contributed to the Conference exhibit.

I wish to express my gratitude to the IBE Council and its President, Mr Raúl Vallejo Corral, Minister of Education of Ecuador, for all the efforts they have made in preparing this year's Conference.

Last, but not least, my thanks to the UNESCO staff, in particular Clementina Acedo and her team at IBE, whose hard work has enabled us to be here today.

Honourable Ministers
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We come together at a particularly challenging time. Education is not an island. It is affected by forces as diverse as urbanization, migration, health, demography and political and economic systems. Most recently, the financial crisis has brought into sharp focus the fragility and interdependence of our world. As always, the poor are likely to be hardest hit. This calls for the firm resolve of all partners here today to ensure that no country reneges on its commitment to education.

Education is a fundamental human right, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. A number of important treaties and normative instruments have since reaffirmed this right – most recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force in May this year. All these instruments are rooted in the same principle of non-discrimination on any basis whatsoever.

This is the essence of inclusion: the right to learn for everyone, no matter what one's background and circumstances might be.

Although a majority of countries have legislation making six to nine years of education compulsory, about 10 percent of the world's primary school-age population is excluded – 75 million children. The *2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, that will be launched here later today, shows that children from the poorest households are those most likely to be excluded or to drop out of school early. Girls still have a higher chance of being out of school than boys. Living in a rural area or an urban slum, being disabled, belonging to a minority group or speaking a minority language all raise the likelihood of being excluded. Education is failing the most disadvantaged when education is the most powerful weapon for escaping poverty.

So the first challenge for education to become inclusive is to develop policies that make learning accessible for the most marginalized and vulnerable. Public policies exist that have made an enormous difference since 2000, when countries adopted the Millennium Development Goals and those of Education for All. We have seen historic progress across sub-Saharan Africa and in a number of South Asian countries towards universal primary education.

But there is a second and equally important dimension to inclusion. Are all children learning and in what conditions? How do you manage large classrooms with students from diverse backgrounds who do not share the same mother tongue? How do you promote citizenship and social responsibility, environmental awareness and knowledge about HIV prevention?

Learning assessments conducted at international, regional and national levels are rich sources of information on the extent to which education systems are succeeding or not in giving students basic knowledge in literacy, maths and

science. Results show that large proportions of students in developing countries do not reach desirable levels of reading. Once again, student background comes heavily into play. In order to respond to the diversity of student needs, backgrounds and learning abilities, we need to give more attention to how schools and classrooms are organized, how teachers are trained and supported, and how curricula are developed.

High quality education systems promote excellence and equity. They have a vested interest in every student. The principles of inclusion challenge us to think in terms of diversity, openness and flexibility without losing sight of the basics required to make quality learning possible, most importantly teachers.

Finally, as I said, education is not an island. The Millennium Development Goals represent a global commitment to improve the lives of the world's poorest people. Education is crucial for reaching each of these goals. To improve health and livelihoods developing countries need to vastly expand early childhood care and education programmes because large numbers of children suffer from malnutrition when they reach primary school. Youth and adult literacy and skills programmes play a central role in opening up new opportunities and promoting social cohesion. We cannot speak about inclusive education systems when 776 million adults live without basic literacy skills. This is a source of marginalization and poverty, not inclusion and empowerment.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ICE opens a conference cycle organized by UNESCO in 2008-2009 focusing, after this event, on basic education for all, education for sustainable development, adult education and higher education. All these conferences are based on the conviction that education is a right and a foundation for development, and that learning takes place throughout life. They aim to encourage a shift towards more flexible, innovative education systems grounded in a concern for equity, inclusion and quality.

Inclusion paves the way to a better shared future. It is crucial that the outcomes of this Conference translate into policies and practices aimed at attaining high-quality

education for all learners. It is first and foremost a matter of political will based on a vision of society in which learning opportunities are within everyone's reach.

Thank you.