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Opening Statement by the
President of UNESCO's General Conference
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Chair, of the Third Thematic Session
"Living together in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies:
perspectives from local authorities"
Within the framework of the International Conference
"UNESCO against Racism: Lessons from the Past,
Current Challenges and Perspectives"

UNESCO HQ 20 March 2009

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cultural diversity, seen as an invaluable asset and a prerequisite of human development, has received universal recognition since the adoption, within these walls in October 2001, of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

Unfortunately however, the actual safeguarding of diversity in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding remains a challenge. "Othering" as a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an "other" is sadly still a commonplace. Despite the volumes written on the phenomena, we still witness tendencies to demonize and dehumanize groups labeled as "different" or "Other".

How can we celebrate diversity within and between borders, while at the same time build national unity and a common sense of belonging? How can we promote social dialogue and social cohesion in *de facto* culturally diverse societies?

The first two sessions of today's conference gave us an insight into various UNESCO initiatives, notably at the normative and policy levels that have sought to address these concerns.

We were reminded of the strenuous decades-long fight to bring down the apartheid regime in South Africa. We heard of UNESCO's renewed commitment to the fight against racism after the 2001 Durban Conference. We

were also given a brief overview of the challenges and successes encountered in the efforts to deconstruct racist stereotypes through education, culture and the media.

This last session that I have the pleasure to chair will take us closer to the so-called grassroots level, to the level where people, regular people, experience these realities and learn to live together. We will look at the phenomena of racism and discrimination at the level where they mostly manifest themselves: the city, the town, the local community.

In 2008, our world reached a turning point: for the first time in history, populations living in urban areas were equal in number to those living in other settings. Indeed, we have witnessed over the last decades a massive move of populations to urban grounds. Cities are viewed as the 'Promised Land' for those in quest of a better future. They have increasingly attracted domestic and international migrants. As a result, the cities have become a melting pot where a multitude of identities meet, interact and mix.

Unfortunately though, cities have also been sites where ignorance, social exclusion and dysfunctional mechanisms of social integration have nurtured negative prejudices and stereotypes that are causing social tensions.

And here I think of the deteriorated urban landscapes that have grown in our metropolitan areas into places that seem almost abandoned, or tacitly accepted in the public conscience as "*des zones de non-droit*".

For all these reasons, municipal authorities and local governments are particularly well-placed to experience first hand the urgent necessity and difficulties of promoting dialogue and understanding. Municipalities should therefore also be at the forefront of the battle against racism.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action made it clear that the fight against racism is the business of everyone. International normative instruments, national legislation and state policies alone are, however, not sufficient to rid our societies of the scourge of racism. This is why an explicit call was extended to local authorities to engage in the battle.

Convinced of the added value of a reinforced partnership with local governments, UNESCO decided to pay special attention to this category of stakeholder in the design of its response to the Durban Conference. It even became one of the chief objectives of *UNESCO's Integrated Strategy to Combat Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance* adopted by the Organization's General Conference in October 2003.

The mechanism designed to promote this closer interaction with municipal authorities is *the International Coalition of Cities against Racism*.

Today, the International Coalition federates six regional components. Under the coordination of a “Lead City”, each regional coalition implements its own « Ten-Point Plan of Action ». Areas such as education, housing, employment and intercultural dialogue are included among the commitments that each adhering city undertakes to promote. More than 350 cities world wide are members of this rapidly expanding and vibrant network.

The distinguished guests sitting at this panel today are all representing city-members of this Network: **Mr Ricardo Ehrlich** (Mayor of Montevideo, Uruguay); **Ms Delphine Bouffenie** (Deputy Mayor of Nantes, France); and **Mr Jose Manuel Gómez Bravo** (Vice-President, *Instituto Cultura del Sur, Network of “Cities - No Ghettos”*, Madrid, Spain) and *Mr Serguei Lazaarev, Chief of the Section for the Fight against Discrimination and Racism* will share their views on the challenges they are facing in struggling against racism. We will also hear them speak about their pioneering work that is currently under way to foster mutual understanding among citizens.

Before I give the floor to our guests, I would just like to remind our audience that our Organization, UNESCO, was notably created to battle the ideologies that condoned racism. Our Constitution states “*that ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war*”. Regrettably, this statement still holds true today and therefore requires that we remain ever more vigilant and combative.

I hope you have an enriching debate. Thank you very much.