Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the Launch of UNESCO’s
Capacity Building Initiatives for Students,
Teachers and Knowledge Citizens

“Towards an Arab Knowledge Society”

Smart Village, Cairo, Egypt, 30 June 2009

Mr Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research,
Mr Minister for Education,
Mr Minister for Communication and Information Technology,
Governors,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join you here in the Smart Village to launch a series of new initiatives aimed at training knowledge workers for knowledge societies in Egypt and across the Arab world.

Allow me to begin by thanking His Excellency Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, with whom I have just had a very productive meeting, for giving his patronage to this important event. I would like to express my gratitude to the 3 Ministers who have made this launch possible and joined us here today. My thanks also go to my colleague Tarek Shawki and to his staff at the UNESCO Cairo Office.

The development of these initiatives would not have been possible without the significant contributions of our private sector partners Microsoft, Intel, Cisco and Apple, as well as Wolfram Research and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Your support and partnership are much appreciated.

It is fitting that today’s launch should take place here in the “Smart Village” in Cairo. This Technology Cluster and Knowledge Park is a place where Multinational and Local Companies, Governmental bodies, Financial Authorities and Organizations,
as well as Educational Institutions and Research and Development Centres can share its state of the art infrastructure. It is a shining example of the “Public Private Partnership” investment model for which Egypt has so successfully taken the lead in the Arab States region, especially in education, research and development.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we mark a new phase in UNESCO’s cooperation with Egypt. But before looking forward, let me say a few words about our past achievements, since Egypt joined UNESCO as one of its founding members in 1946.

The best known is undoubtedly the Nubia Campaign, whose 50th anniversary we celebrated earlier this year. Only a few days ago, on 17 June, I joined Ms Shadia Kenawy, Permanent Delegate of Egypt to UNESCO, at the inauguration of a beautiful exhibition chronicling this and other aspects of our cooperation.

The Egyptian and Sudanese governments' request for UNESCO's help to save the 3,000-year-old monuments and temples of ancient Nubia from flooding by the Aswan Dam marked the start of unprecedented campaign.

It was a moving demonstration of the miracles that can be achieved by international cooperation. Saving the temples and artefacts of Nubia became an urgent priority, transcending national interests and pride.

The success of the Campaign inspired the development and adoption in 1972 of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention and the inscription of sites on its World Heritage List, including the Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae in 1979.

But the campaign and cooperation did not end with the successful relocation of the monuments. It continues today through the International Campaign for the Creation of the Nubia Museum in Aswan and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, soon to be opened in Cairo.

Another exemplary collaboration was the campaign launched in 1988 to re-construct the ancient “Library of Alexandria”. For over 12 years, UNESCO
cooperated with the Government of Egypt and the international community until the “Bibliotheca Alexandrina” opened in October 2002.

True to UNESCO’s mandate, the library aims to be a centre of excellence in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

More recently, Egypt played a major role, with UNESCO and the Library of Congress, in building the pilot of the World Digital Library.

Both are excellent examples of how UNESCO and Egypt are cooperating to promote research and intellectual exchange in the Arab States region and globally.

This brings me to our theme today: how, on this strong basis of bilateral cooperation, UNESCO and Egypt are partnering with other local actors to launch new initiatives aimed at leading the way “Towards an Arab Knowledge Society.”

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Knowledge of how to do things, how to communicate and how to work with others is the most precious wealth of humankind. Indeed, UNESCO was founded on a presumption of the importance of accelerating knowledge acquisition.

The dramatic advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the last twenty years, particularly the rapid emergence of the internet and the web as a global public network, have provided the ideal conditions for widening and globalizing the public forum for knowledge.

In an increasingly connected global community, the ability to access information and transform it into meaningful and useful knowledge is a key driver of sustainable social and economic development.

Yet, huge numbers of people are denied the opportunities to acquire and use knowledge in this way. UNESCO is working with its Member States to put in place mechanisms to facilitate the building of people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented knowledge societies based on four principles: quality education for all;
universal access to information and knowledge; respect for cultural and linguistic diversity; and freedom of expression.

UNESCO regards the digital divide as one of the greatest obstacles to building these knowledge societies. In much of the world, they have yet to be created, but by presenting a vision of what such societies might become, UNESCO has sought to define a concept that goes beyond issues of connectivity and technological development, to encompass a broader and more empowering vision of the potential of ICTs to enhance human development.

The 3 ICT initiatives we are launching today contribute to realizing that vision.

The first is the launch of the second phase of UNESCO’s “ICT Competency Framework for Teachers”. This global initiative aims to set the stage for quality integration of ICTs into teaching and learning by identifying the skills needed by teachers to integrate them in their classrooms.

The seeds for this global initiative were sown by the UNESCO Cairo office in 2003. It is therefore my pleasure to attend its regional launch back where it all began.

I should like to pay tribute to the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Communication and Information Technology for supporting it in Egypt. Let me also take this opportunity to call on educators, governments, NGOs and the private sector to use the framework to develop teacher training content and certification models to equip teachers with the skills they need to prepare their students for the 21st century.

The second initiative being launched today is the first Arab e-courseware digital library and I should like to thank the 3 Ministers for sponsoring it. This is part of a global initiative to establish a global network of “content creation centres”, such as the one launched in Cairo on 1 June, to develop e-courseware using state-of-the-art tools. You will learn more about this a little later. Let me just emphasize that increasing the skills of teachers through the ICT-Competency Framework and making high quality, multilingual content available through e-courseware digital libraries will empower educators to create truly innovative learning models adapted to 21st century needs.
Today’s third initiative, “IT literacy in Arab States”, was conceived by the UNESCO-Cairo office as a tool for developing computer literacy across the region. It aims to establish a benchmark for basic computer skills and the opportunity to join emerging knowledge societies. I had the pleasure to launch the initiative myself in 2001 when I was in Cairo, and I am delighted to see that it has had such a rapid success. Since 2001, 500,000 registrants have obtained the International Computer Driving License - or ICDL as it is known - at one of 500 UNESCO accredited centres in 8 Arab countries for which UNESCO-Cairo carries out quality assurance services. And in 2007, Egypt committed to training and certifying one million registrants over a 5-year period. Progress is very encouraging, with 170,000 certified since then, and 240,000 in training. Let me pay tribute to the Ministers of Communication and Information Technology, Higher Education and Scientific Research and Education for the vision they have shown in so doing.

I am especially pleased that attention is being focussed on ensuring that women enjoy equal access to ICDL certification because female empowerment is an important objective at the core of UNESCO’s capacity building strategy in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality.

Today is also an opportunity to learn the preliminary results of the national education reform review undertaken by UNESCO, with the financial support of the World Bank.

It is part of a series of reviews commissioned by the Minister of Education, which aim to ensure that Egypt’s education policies respond to evolving education needs.

This one had three objectives: to analyse educational policies and reforms between 2003 and 2008; to evaluate the effectiveness of basic and secondary education; and to develop the capacity for such analysis within the education ministry.

Allow me to congratulate the Government on its decision to invite other countries from the region and the E-9 to the review’s formal launch at the end of July. This is another sign of Egypt’s commitment to exchanging good practices and strengthening international cooperation in education. Other examples include its hosting the E-9 meeting in 2003; the Education for All High-Level Group meeting in 2006; and, earlier this month, the regional preparatory meeting for the Arab States
for the World Conference on Higher Education, which I will open at UNESCO Headquarters on 5 July.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The initiatives being launched today underscore the important role of UNESCO as a standard setter and the benefits to be gained from strong public-private partnerships. Let me once again thank the Egyptian Government, our private sector partners and UNESCO’s Cairo Office for their hard work in developing these initiatives. It is my sincere wish that more will follow so that we can extend our work to develop human capacities, invest in better learning models, and use the power of ICTs to build sustainable knowledge societies.

In closing, let me reiterate my pleasure at being back in Egypt for my 6th and last visit as Director-General before my mandate expires in November. Since 1999, I have been proud to see our bilateral cooperation go from strength to strength. Today’s event is a clear sign that it will continue to flourish in the future.

Thank you.