



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
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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 of the  
Plenary Ministerial Forum of the  
35th session of the General Conference**

**UNESCO, 8 October 2009**

Mr President of the Republic of Turkey,  
Mr President of the General Conference,  
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

This is a time of great uncertainty, marked by myriad and complex crises in such areas as energy, food, finance and the climate. In addition, poverty is silently gaining ground, while inequality has been making ever deeper inroads for nearly one generation.

I am firmly convinced, alas, that these are not momentary woes. There is now a genuine risk that they will become a world development crisis.

The progress achieved in boosting development in the last ten years can no longer be regarded as a given today.

The figures give cause for alarm. The world recession has already tipped another one hundred million people below the threshold of extreme poverty. Hunger is wreaking havoc and infant mortality is on the rise again. The most vulnerable and the weakest have fallen victim to this crisis, and it is all the more necessary for Africa and gender equality to remain major priorities.

Joint reflection is required, at the highest level, on the origins, manifestations and effects of the crisis in UNESCO's fields of competence, namely education, science, culture, communication and information.

I am gratified that this first Plenary Ministerial Forum, an innovative feature in the organization of the General Conference, affords us an opportunity to do so.

In that connection, I should like to thank the ministers and eminent persons who have agreed to introduce and moderate your discussions throughout the day.

I wish to pay tribute, in particular, to H.E. Mr Abdullah Gül, President of the Republic of Turkey, who has done us the great honour of opening the debates this morning.

The topics before you, which include ways of investing out of the crisis in UNESCO's fields of competence and the Organization's specific role in the pursuit of international development goals, will give us further food for thought and will guide our action under the next Programme.

Mr President,

While the precise impact of the crisis – including on the level of Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows – remains to be determined, it is affecting all countries.

In Africa especially, a global priority for UNESCO, the significant danger is that the continent will suffer disproportionately. And as we know, in times of hardship, it is women and girls who suffer first. We must avoid the pitfalls of the 1980s recession, when a reduction in investment hit the social domains.

UNESCO, as the rest of the United Nations, is monitoring closely the impact of the crisis on all its fields of competence. We intend to pursue these efforts and to bring our findings to the attention of governments, policy-makers, and key donors.

Consider education, for example. Spending on education is one of the best investments a country can make. Research shows that each extra year of schooling increases GDP per capita by 4% to 6%.

Two UNESCO surveys launched earlier this year show a mixed picture of what is happening. In some middle-income countries, counter-cyclical measures aimed at stimulating the economy are having positive effects on education, for example through investment in school building projects. And Egypt has voted a budget that increases expenditure on education by 15.5% this year over last. Yet, other countries are showing negative trends: teacher recruitment is being frozen; and

development budgets for elementary education, literacy and early childhood education are being cut.

My experience at the head of UNESCO over the past 10 years has convinced me that there is a direct link between investing in knowledge and accelerating development. Indeed, this was the premise on which UNESCO was founded.

This crisis must not become a development crisis, rolling back years of investment in social sectors and soft infrastructures such as education, science, culture and communication. We believe that this is a time not only to preserve the gains made, but actually to increase investment in core areas.

That is why I wrote to G20 leaders ahead of their meeting in London on 2 April 2009 to argue for increased investment in the knowledge-based social domains as the key to sustainable recovery, social cohesion, prosperity and peace. Their communiqué – and that of the United Nations Chief Executives Board meeting here at UNESCO a few days later – recognized the need for continued investment in these domains.

I also personally urged G8 leaders to foster greater investment in education, and was pleased that – in their final Declaration, adopted in L'Aquila, Italy, on 10 July – they reaffirmed the right to education for all and the six Dakar goals. I quote: “investing in education and skills development is crucial for a sustainable recovery from the current economic crisis and for long-term development”.

Committing to resolving the crisis must also mean renewing our collective engagement in the multilateral system, for there can be no sustainable and effective response without international cooperation.

With five years left to the target date for achieving internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar EFA Goals, we need to look hard at our approaches for doing so.

This must include a renewed commitment to development aid, over and beyond debt relief. While donors have made significant efforts in recent years to increase ODA levels, the stark reality is that it remains insufficient; is imbalanced in favour of a few countries; does not target enough those most in need; and still does not count some vital activities. For example, normative and standard-setting activities, and

much of UNESCO's work in culture, are not counted as contributing to development by the OECD/DAC.

As Director-General of a United Nations specialized agency, let me also note that the generation-long trend to maintain the budgets of United Nations organizations at a near zero-nominal growth is seriously hampering our collective ability to assist developing countries. This situation is of great concern to all United Nations organizations.

Mr President,

This Forum is a double opportunity. It is an opportunity to advocate the need to increase investments in and through education, science, culture and communication. It is also an opportunity for you to tell us how UNESCO can best carry out its mission in the coming years, particularly what type of engagement from UNESCO can have the greatest impact. What sort of specialist policy advice and capacity-building could benefit you most?

In your debates, we would like to hear your assessment of the impact of the crisis on your country and what it means in terms of meeting the challenges of the internationally agreed development goals. For example, your discussions on the full spectrum of our educational agenda could really help to support our actions and reinforce UNESCO's position vis-à-vis its partners and stakeholders.

Your inputs will also be particularly important concerning UNESCO's action in other key domains, including science, technology and innovation policies; the management of freshwater and the oceans; ethical norms and social transformations; the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity; the building of knowledge societies; and post-conflict and post-disaster situations.

We also expect to benefit from your exchanges on the perspectives, challenges and opportunities arising from UNESCO's role as a specialized agency within a reforming United Nations system. How can we ensure ownership for national responses in key domains and harness the potential of South-South and North-South-South cooperation?

I invite you to debate in a very open and interactive manner, and to be bold in your recommendations. You may be sure that I will follow your debates with great interest. I therefore wish you every success and thank you very much for your attention.