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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

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Address by

H.E. Dr Davidson L. Hepburn,

on the occasion of his election as President
of the General Conference at its 35th session

UNESCO, 6 October 2009

Permit me to begin by paraphrasing these lines from one of King David's Psalms: "If I had ten thousand tongues, they would not be enough to give thanks and praise to God for his intervention in making this moment possible".

Mr President of the 34th session of the General Conference,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,
Mr Director-General,
Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,
Honourable representatives of intergovernmental organizations,
Distinguished representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society,
Dear friends and colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I count it a singular honour, as well as a privilege, to have been elected President of the 35th session of UNESCO's General Conference.

In this regard, I would wish to thank the Government of the Bahamas, together with the Heads of CARICOM States, for believing in my ability to represent the subregion by virtue of this prestigious post. I am most grateful to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Bahamas, which under the guidance of the Under-Secretary and her very hard-working team spearheaded a strong external campaign to convince Member States of UNESCO that CARICOM had a candidate to be reckoned with.

Similarly, I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Education of the Bahamas which ably assisted with logistics. The presence of the Honourable Carl Bethel, Minister of Education, along with his delegation demonstrates the significance my Government attaches to this honour.

In addition, the High Commissioner of the Bahamas in London and his Second Secretary, who coordinated activities here on the ground, offered invaluable assistance.

I would be remiss if I did not express special appreciation to the Bahamas' Ambassador to the United Nations who went above and beyond the call of duty in seeking support from Member States in New York.

I am convinced, however, that none of this would have been possible were it not, first of all, for the selfless dedication and concerted efforts of a group of delegates that I termed "the merry women of CARICOM". Their exuberance augurs well for continued collaboration in carrying out the mandate of this house. Further, individuals from among the six regional groups of the Members of the Executive Board demonstrated their determination to change the status quo by choosing someone from a small island developing State to assume the responsibilities of the President of the General Conference of UNESCO. This act strengthens the foundation for the future growth of the institution.

I will forever cherish the fond memories of my tenure on the Executive Board, where, in addition to learning the rules of the house, I was able to cultivate a cadre of good friends.

Please know, colleagues, that I would endeavour to uphold the trust that you have placed in me and with your help make this 35th session of the General Conference a very productive and enjoyable experience.

Last, but not least, I am indeed proud and delighted to have my wife, Ada, my son, Davidson and my daughter-in-law, Denise, who have flown thousands of miles, just to witness this auspicious and momentous occasion. You have made me very happy indeed.

Distinguished Delegates,

When choosing to elect a candidate from a Caribbean State, the international community has opted to "take the road less travelled by", in the words of American writer Robert Frost, "and that has made all the difference". Indeed, the last occasion when a representative from the Caribbean was given the opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity on one of UNESCO's governing bodies dates back some 35 years, when Mr Hector Wynter of Jamaica was elected Chairman of the Executive Board.

I would like to assure members of UNESCO that I will do my utmost to carry out my duties effectively and undertake to be attentive to the concerns of each and every Member State, as well as to take into my purview the interests of UNESCO as a whole.

In attempting to fulfil my mandate, I will endeavour to seek inspiration from my many able and committed predecessors, and most particularly from my esteemed colleague H.E. Dr Georges N. Anastassopoulos, President of the 34th session of the General Conference from whom I have already tasted his wise and candid counsel. Under his able leadership, you have all made the previous session successful in many ways. I highly value the excellent work he carried out to improve the structure and the methods of work of the General Conference and to reinforce its role as UNESCO's supreme decision-making body responsible for determining the policies and main lines of work of the Organization.

I should also like to pay tribute to the Director-General, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, for his unfailing leadership and determination when guiding the destinies of our Organization for the past decade – a tall and most demanding order indeed. For example, the important reforms he has carried out have considerably strengthened the Secretariat. He has spared no effort to bring together all Member States so as to ensure coherent and effective implementation of the programmes of the

Organization. It was a pleasure for me to work with him during my tenure on the Board, particularly on the introduction of his reform programme which I hope to promote.

Allow me to now turn my attention to the substantive part of my statement. I have long held the view that the mark of a good speaker is to be brief, be sincere and be seated. However, today I beg your indulgence as this occasion calls for a slight deviation from my premise.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am cognizant of the fact that to be effective, and to secure due credit, **the General Conference must work in a transparent and understandable manner**. In order not to be an isolated universe, understood only by a handful of experts, it must render its designated goals and achievements accessible to a wider public. Its inner workings – recognizably heavy and complex – should not be a hindrance but rather a tool for accountability and realistic delivery of promising and forward-looking projects and programmes in our respective Member States. My dear colleagues, these are not mere words or campaign promises, but rather expressions of the deep passion I feel for the need for interdependence.

I see my role essentially as that of a **facilitator**, a broker of sorts, both when the agenda is moving happily along or when matters may get difficult and, occasionally, confused, or controversial. I will thus work closely with all concerned by nurturing a sustained dialogue with the Chairpersons of the seven Commissions and of the three Committees of the General Conference, and I will remain in permanent contact with my distinguished friend and colleague, the Chairperson of the Executive Board, H.E. Mr Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yaï, whom I consider to be a consummate diplomat, respected for his wisdom and savoir faire. May I express to you, Sir, my sincere admiration for the talented manner in which you conducted the Board's deliberations over the past two years.

I will also maintain close working relationships with those members of the Secretariat who are instrumental in facilitating the heavy and demanding workload of the Conference and its subsidiary organs. I should like to take this opportunity therefore to salute the staff members of the Organization – at Headquarters as well as in the field – for their dedication, commitment and hard work. Generally, I was deeply moved by the positive response I received from the entire staff upon my designation as President of the General Conference. Your smiles, handshakes and kind comments have left an indelible impression upon my mind.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This session of the general conference takes place in a context of unprecedented global crises.

Events over the last year have proven beyond any shadow of a doubt that no country is an island unto itself. No government can protect its people completely from cross-border problems. Around the world, the economic, financial, food and energy crises have caused despair and hardship.

It would seem that those least responsible for these crises, the poorest and the most vulnerable, are the most affected by its fall-outs. To make matters worse, they are also the least able to respond.

On another level, many families are forced to take their children out of school. Around 75 million children are currently out of school – nearly half of them in Africa. Millions more leave primary education without gaining basic skills. On current trends, 29 million children will still be out of school in 2015.

The situation of the adults is not any better. the goal set in Dakar was to raise adult literacy levels by 50 per cent by 2015. The UNESCO *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* warns that on

present trends around three-quarters of countries for which there are data will miss this target, leaving some 700 million adults still unable to read and write in 2015.

Why am I giving you these statistics, you may rightly ask?

Simple. To show you that we can no longer treat the work of UNESCO as business as usual.

Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Education is essential for growth. It is an absolute must for poverty reduction and development. Indeed, it is the most important pillar of development. Education builds knowledge and skills and helps to strengthen civil society, national capacity and good governance.

As lead United Nations agency in charge of education for all, UNESCO plays a vital role in this field:

Firstly, our Organization has consistently underlined the **fundamental function of education for development** and the direct link between education and health, sustainable development and economic growth. UNESCO has campaigned for enhanced coordination of policies in the field.

Secondly, for many years, our Organization has advocated **quality education that is accessible to all**. Considerable efforts have been made to combat illiteracy for it is vital that everyone receive an education. We must take satisfaction in initiatives that have been put into action, such as the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE).

Thirdly, UNESCO has unstintingly emphasized the importance of **teachers** and the need for improved teacher training. A number of excellent projects have been implemented aimed at helping countries draft and enforce comprehensive teacher training policies, such as the Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA).

UNESCO must continue its activities, finding innovative methods and consolidating its participation in the United Nations' response to the crisis, and even more importantly, it must assume its role within the United Nations as **global coordinator for EFA**.

However, let us not forget that **funding for EFA is primarily the duty of national governments**. As we look towards 2015, the target for the achievement of education for all, we must recall the Dakar promise that "no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by lack of resources". The global financial crisis must not be used as an excuse to cut education spending.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In less than two months, our countries will meet for the **United Nations Climate Conference** in Copenhagen, with a view to choosing a successor to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Climate change is unfolding right before our eyes with real and immediate impact. Its consequences are severe: rise in sea levels, flooding, world famine, in particular in Africa and Central Asia, and extinction of approximately one third of our plant and animal species. Natural disasters that have struck violently and caused despair and grief in Indonesia, the Philippines, Samoa and Tonga, among other places, are a recent example of this tragic situation.

Such disasters are blatantly unjust, because while rich countries are to blame for climate change, it is the poorest countries that suffer the most terrible consequences.

As lead agency for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO is working to integrate climate change considerations into national curricula and lifelong learning programmes. However, it is not up to UNESCO alone to promote education for sustainable development. Strong international cooperation and solidarity are absolutely necessary.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In recent decades, UNESCO has done much to develop standard-setting instruments in the area of **culture**. Six international conventions have been drawn up, which constitute a very solid foundation for promoting UNESCO's activities in this field.

I shall mention here the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and, lastly, the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which together form the basis of our standard-setting arsenal as regards cultural diversity. **The challenge now is to ensure that these conventions interact harmoniously.**

Promotion of the values of dialogue, mutual understanding, tolerance and cultural diversity is at the heart of UNESCO's mandate. Practical action must be carried out in the field, nationally and regionally. In 2010, the celebration of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, for which UNESCO has been designated lead agency, will provide the occasion to strengthen the Organization's activities benefiting these causes.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It should be emphasized that this session of the General Conference will have the important responsibility of electing and proceeding with **the investiture of a new Director-General for UNESCO**, for which you are aware, the Executive Board made a recommendation. It will also examine the programme and budget of the Organization for the next biennium 2010-2011. As mentioned by the Director-General at the opening of the 181st session of the Executive Board, "The programme and budget for the forthcoming biennium marks a strong commitment to reinforce UNESCO's country-level action and deepen our engagement with the United Nations system". In this regard, the discussions you will have on UNESCO's decentralization structure, in the context of the ongoing United Nations reform at the country level, will have a direct impact on the future orientations of our Organization.

I should like to call your attention briefly to the two global priorities – **gender equality and Africa** – that we have set for the Medium-Term Strategy of the Organization. These priorities should be kept in mind throughout all our discussions.

In conclusion, let me tell you a personal anecdote, not for any other purpose but to give you a glimpse of what makes me tick.

A long, long time ago when I was but a mere stripling growing up in a tiny hamlet of Doubs in Cat Island, the Bahamas, toting wood on my head to build fires in the outside kitchen for cooking purposes; fetching water from the public well for washing clothes and bathing; walking, barefoot, some 3½ miles round trip every day along rocky paths to attend a one-room all-age school, I had no idea what the future held in store for me.

When my father said that at eleven years of age I was old enough to take on more manly chores in the fields instead of wasting time on book learning, my wise mother defied him and encouraged me to get all the education I could. I loved to read anything that crossed my path and one day stumbled on Rudyard Kipling's "If for boys". I memorized the lines even though they held little

meaning for me, at that time. But as I grew older I began to appreciate the message which continues to haunt me.

I welcome this opportunity to share with you some of the lines that have been instrumental in shaping my life:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster,
And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;
If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue;
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run, –
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

Distinguished delegates,

I realize that everything that I have said has been stated before. There is nothing wrong with repetition. My purpose is to let you know that there is a “new guy in town” who has adopted a Chinese proverb: “If you aim at nothing, you will hit it”. This means that my goal, with your help, is to make sure that all States have a voice in the affairs of UNESCO.

Thank you for your attention.