



General Conference
35th session, Paris 2009

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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,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Information document

35 C/INF.3
13 October 2009
Original: English/French

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
in response to the general policy debate
of the 35th session of the General Conference**

UNESCO, 12 October 2009

Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr Chair of the Executive Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

After eight intense days, we are entering the second week of the General Conference. The pace of our work has been set, the tone given. The global situation, uncertain and worrying in many respects, more than ever justifies the confidence that we must have in the continuity of our values and in the relevance of our mission.

Such expressions of trust were forcefully reiterated by the Heads of State and government who honoured us with their presence at the opening of the session, namely the President of Montenegro, Mr Filip Vujanovic, whose country joined the Organization in 2007, and the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mr Najib Tun Razak, who made his multilateral commitment a reality by announcing the establishment of a fund-in-trust intended to strengthen South-South cooperation in educational and scientific areas.

The general policy debate at this 35th session, held in the presence of almost 3,000 people, enabled more than 183 speakers, including 139 ministers and vice-ministers, to address this forum. Such full participation was encouraging and stimulating, and here I would like to congratulate Mr Davidson Hepburn very warmly for so ably chairing the discussions.

The Plenary Ministerial Forum on 8 October was marked by the statement by President Abdullah Gül of Turkey, who spoke out in favour of a "new and revived multilateralism" and a strengthening of UNESCO's role in addressing the many and varied challenges faced at the global level.

This Ministerial Forum, which gave almost 80 ministers the opportunity to engage in a dialogue, was most interesting and indeed very promising for the future. We will have to draw lessons from this experience to continue to improve the format of this type of meeting.

Personally, I note in particular the emphasis placed by the ministers on the role of knowledge in processes of social and political transformation. Faced with what has been diagnosed as a “knowledge crisis”, many of them underscored the action expected of UNESCO, namely closer cooperation with institutions of higher learning and research, particularly universities, the systematic inclusion of new information technologies in knowledge policies and, lastly, capacity-building in States in the areas of analysis and assessment, statistical data collection and follow-up on national policies.

Following the Ministerial Forum, more than 70 ministers and eminent representatives of multilateral organizations met in the context of a round table to engage in future-oriented thinking on the outlook for education systems as it emerges from the series of world conferences on education organized by UNESCO during the last biennium.

This very afternoon, another ministerial round table will examine the contribution of UNESCO to responsible ocean governance. A first for the General Conference, this is also the occasion to mark the 50th anniversary of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO.

Lastly, before I share my thoughts on a few specific points raised during the general policy debate, please allow me to convey to you my heartfelt gratitude for the many expressions of approval and support that you have voiced with regard to my action at the head of this Organization, both in terms of programmes and management, over the last ten years.

My determination to fulfil the mission with which you entrusted me has never wavered, and it is gratifying to hear you encourage the Organization to persevere along the path of continuity. I am certain that my successor will pay close attention to your message.

Mr President,

This General Conference takes place against the backdrop of multiple global crises. As you have all emphasized, this makes UNESCO’s work more relevant and more important than ever. Member States place high hopes in UNESCO’s ability to show the way out of this period of unprecedented uncertainty, and help set our world on a more inclusive and sustainable path. We carry an enormous responsibility to respond effectively to these expectations.

Let me focus on five major conclusions that I have drawn from your interventions.

The first conclusion – and the overarching message of last Thursday’s Ministerial Forum – is the need to boost support to the social sectors as the basis both for recovery from the current economic crisis and for achieving more equitable and sustainable development in the long term.

You have underscored the importance of investing in science to accelerate growth and find solutions to development challenges. You have spoken of how promoting culture can strengthen societies, and spur the confidence and creativity to forge a better future. Above all, you have reaffirmed the centrality of education for all aspects of human development.

The President of Turkey, Mr Abdullah Gül, expressed the view of all participants when he said that “never in history has it been more pressing to invest in education”.

Over the past week, ministers from developing Member States have announced the bold measures they are taking to protect education budgets and maintain progress towards Education for All. I note in particular the tremendous efforts many countries are making to safeguard the rights of girls, who are usually the first in times of hardship to be taken out of school and forced into work.

The level of national commitment to education is very encouraging. However, many low-income countries do not have the fiscal capacity to go it alone. In order to sustain educational expansion and maintain quality, they need external assistance.

I was pleased to hear that some traditional donors have promised to increase aid to basic education, and that new donors are also emerging. However, many more countries will need to scale up their development assistance if education goals are to be met.

Last week's ministerial roundtable on education brought into focus several of the recurrent concerns that emerged during the general policy debate, in particular about how to make education systems more effective and better geared to meeting the new realities created by the crisis.

The first concern ministers voiced is the need to strengthen the link between education and the world of work. This is particularly important at a time of rapidly evolving labour markets and rising youth unemployment. Many speakers have called for a radical improvement of technical and vocational education and training (TVET), both to help get young people into jobs and to expand opportunities for skills development throughout life.

UNESCO's recent adoption of a new TVET strategy is therefore very timely. The Education Sector will give top priority to its implementation in document 35 C/5.

The second concern regards the quality of education. Education today must encourage critical thinking and more analytical and inquiring attitudes. It is not enough for students to acquire knowledge; they need to learn how to apply it in a complex and rapidly changing world.

Many ministers have put the spotlight on the role that new technologies can play in creating a more dynamic and interactive learning environment. UNESCO is giving renewed focus to this, in particular through its efforts to enhance teacher training methods so that teachers really are empowering students with the skills they need to succeed.

The third concern is the capacity gap in science education. This has serious implications for national economic growth and development. Many ministers have spoken of acute shortages of qualified science teachers, and of the fact that not enough children – in particular not nearly enough girls – want to be scientists.

Here, let me come back to what I said in my opening speech about the UNESCO-L'Oréal Prize for Women in Science and how it seeks to inspire girls to enroll in science and achieve excellence. I am proud to announce that not one, as I said last Tuesday, but in fact two former laureates have received Nobel Prizes this year – in Chemistry and in Medicine. I hope these success stories will encourage other talented young women to engage in the quest for scientific discovery and innovation.

Fourth and finally, ministers have highlighted the crucial ethical role of education in promoting the values of human rights and respect for each other and the world we share.

This is what UNESCO is championing through its leadership of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The Decade advances a model of development founded on a different relationship with nature, people and society – a relationship of co-dependence that calls upon each one of us to cultivate a sense of responsibility for all our acts.

As we move into the second half of the Decade, UNESCO will focus on helping countries integrate a sustainable development perspective into their education policies, plans and curricula.

Global climate change and the increase in other environmental threats, have given new urgency to UNESCO's action under the Decade, as it has to many elements of our work.

Mr President,

This leads me to the second key message: UNESCO can and must do more to address the impacts of climate change, in particular for those Member States most at risk.

UNESCO is already working to protect small island developing states and coastal cities from sea-level change caused by climate change. This is one of the issues we will be addressing at the round table on the oceans starting today.

It is clear that we need to make a special effort to maintain the health of the ocean, which absorbs much of the excess carbon coming from human activities. IOC coordinates the real-time collection of observations of the ocean, information that is critical to improve our knowledge and to manage the impacts of climate change.

Many of you have highlighted the devastating effects of natural disasters, which are increasing in scale and number due to climate change. This was evidenced most recently in the widespread flooding provoked by typhoon Ketsana in the Philippines. The tsunami in the Pacific Ocean, which struck Tonga, Samoa and American Samoa, is another extreme event, which underlines the need for Member States to enhance preparedness for natural disasters, and build capacities to mitigate their effects. UNESCO will continue to assist Member States in these areas. Of paramount importance is enhancing the awareness and preparation of local populations.

Many of you have also advocated for a long-term, holistic approach to climate change. Indeed, we know that climate-change will affect not only us, but future generations to come. As the impacts of climate change increase, the world will face concerns of an increasingly complex nature, not only scientific, but also social, ethical and political.

It is therefore essential that we lay the groundwork for future generations to understand and effectively confront this challenge. As I have said, UNESCO is already helping countries to integrate climate change issues into national curricula and lifelong learning programmes. We are working with the media to raise public awareness of climate change and encourage evidence-based debate. We are also promoting a better understanding and management of the social impacts of climate change – for example through our work on migration and sustainable urban development. As your interventions have shown, this work will become increasingly important.

I note the strong support many of you expressed for the preparation of a draft universal declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change, as proposed by COMEST. I look forward to a constructive debate on the proposed resolution in the joint Science and SHS Commission.

Given the nature of the challenges of climate change, ethics is an essential component of the assessment of risks, vulnerabilities and potential responses. A declaration on ethical principles could assist the international community to respond comprehensively to climate change, and address the special needs of countries most exposed to its effects.

This certainly falls within UNESCO's remit, and I am confident that this proposal will not in any way interfere in the Copenhagen negotiations.

Mr President,

A third key challenge that many of you have referred to is the priority that UNESCO should give to the poorest and most vulnerable populations, particularly in countries affected by the current global crisis. The eloquent statement on the subject by the President of the General Conference, Mr Davidson Hepburn, struck a deep chord in me, and I wish to assure you that we share this concern.

The choice of Africa and gender equality as global priorities of draft document 35 C/5 is consistent with this objective, as we focus all our efforts on combating poverty and disparities, and on building national and regional capacity.

Furthermore, we have deliberately chosen to place more emphasis during the next biennium on activities benefiting youth, least developed countries and small island developing states. By further focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, I know that our action will have a greater impact. With a view to meeting this requirement as far as education is concerned, we will provide further financial assistance in the next biennium to 20 target countries – particularly in Africa – at greatest risk of not achieving the Education for All goals by 2015.

Much remains to be done, and we might do well to build upon the strong recommendations of, *inter alia*, the UNESCO Youth Forum, which calls for further efforts with regard to inclusive education. In this respect, I am fully in agreement with the ministers who called on UNESCO to make youth a key strategic issue in coming years.

The most vulnerable countries, as many of you have pointed out, are also countries in post-conflict and post-disaster situations. I appreciate your unconditional support for UNESCO's initiatives in this area in recent years. I am referring, for instance, to the statement by the representative of Côte d'Ivoire, who noted with satisfaction the tangible effects of our special post-conflict overall support programme in his country.

In this connection, the statement by Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al Missned, First Lady of Qatar, stressing the decisive role of, in particular, education and culture in reconciliation and reconstruction processes, was most stimulating and encouraging. We are endeavouring to meet this challenge, with her invaluable assistance, in Iraq, the Gaza Strip and other regions.

In fact, perceptions have drastically changed during this decade, and I am pleased to note that quality education, cultural heritage and the training of journalists, for instance, are now recognized by our partners and by a growing number of Member States as humanitarian priorities.

Picking up the threads of dialogue is the first step to peace and development. You will understand that, in the light of the latest current events, I cannot but refer specifically to the case of the Old Town of Jerusalem. Despite the tension that has prevailed on the ground in recent days, I wish to state that, within UNESCO's fields of competence, our ongoing objective will remain, in close and continuous consultation with all the parties involved, to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the site, recognized and admired for its universal value.

Mr President,

The fourth conclusion I have drawn from the debates of the past week is how UNESCO's vision of culture's pivotal role in human development and peace really has come of age.

Many speakers, including the Presidents of Montenegro and Turkey, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and delegates to the Youth Forum, have confirmed the myriad ways in which culture contributes to development, from encouraging innovation to generating income and employment. Several themes emerged from the debates.

First was the importance of UNESCO's comprehensive and mutually reinforcing framework of conventions in the field of culture, as the basis for promoting the diversity of all cultural expressions and integrating culture into national development strategies.

The challenge for UNESCO is to increase our capacity-building activities and specialized technical advice in order to assist Member States in this regard. I have no doubt that the growing number of category 2 centres in the field of culture will be valuable partners in this effort.

Clearly, this makes it even more critical that culture is mainstreamed in development assistance, including the common country programming exercises of United Nations country teams.

I am nevertheless conscious of the work that remains to be done to maximize the implementation and synergies of UNESCO's conventions – in particular those of 1972, 2003 and 2005. I appreciate the recognition by a number of Member States of the need to reinforce the respective

Secretariats, as well as to provide financial support to their dedicated voluntary funds, so that they can fully meet your expectations.

A second theme was the affirmation of the need to promote social cohesion, especially in times of crisis and dislocation, and the inseparable link between dialogue and respect for diversity.

The Governor General of Canada expressed this idea most eloquently. I quote: "... misunderstanding, exclusion and violence, which are never justified, are the result of dialogues that never took place and debates about ideas that were never launched ... It is the difference between cultures that makes their encounter an inexhaustible source of renewal and that defines human genius."

You have also underscored the importance of UNESCO's role in promoting interfaith and interreligious dialogue, in particular among young people. This was a theme I explored in July with His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia and other eminent religious leaders from across the world. It must be further promoted in the context of the 2010 International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, for which UNESCO has been given a lead role. Indeed, I noted with pleasure that several ministers have indicated their intention to do so.

2010 is an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate UNESCO's mandate to promote unity through diversity, in partnership with all stakeholders, including the Alliance of Civilizations.

Let me add in this regard how pleased I am to hear the enthusiasm among countries in South-East Europe to continue the annual regional Summits of Heads of State. My special appreciation goes to President Gül of Turkey for offering to host next year's meeting, on the theme "music as a metaphor of cultural dialogue".

A final but very powerful message to emerge was a ringing affirmation of how cultural diversity contributes to the effective exercise of human rights and democratic governance; the right of every individual to express his or her opinion on an equal basis with others.

This is a core message of the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. It is also a central thread of the World Report, *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, which I shall launch next week.

Before leaving the question of cultural diversity, let me say that I am aware of the divergent points of view concerning the draft declaration of principles relating to cultural objects displaced in connection with the Second World War. I am acutely conscious of the sensitivity of this issue, which has been the focus of lengthy discussion since 2006, but would like to express my heartfelt conviction that this is a matter best brought to conclusion through consensus. Let me therefore encourage all parties to do their utmost to do so.

Mr President,

I shall conclude on a fifth point which lay at the heart of your statements, namely the need to revitalize international cooperation in order to prepare the ground for more sustainable and inclusive growth.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama last Friday "for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples" is to be seen as a symbol of hope, since it paid tribute to the virtues of multilateralism and to those who are engaged, the world over, in the untiring quest for dialogue and peace.

Such a message finds resonance within our Organization, whose main role is more than ever, as you have amply stressed, to build sustained dialogue in the service of a just peace.

As many of you have emphasized, international cooperation must be directed towards solidarity and the reduction of the disparities between the North and South. We will need to continue our

efforts with the support of the international community, because expectations are so very great in the developing countries. I particularly have in mind the African continent, where it is essential for the donors to honour the commitments entered into at the Gleneagles Summit in 2005 and to go even further. Let us say once again – no country should be thwarted in its efforts to achieve the Education for All goals on account of a lack of resources.

Of course, mobilizing financial resources is a major part of the advocacy efforts that UNESCO must carry out with development partners. But the issue of funding is only part of the solution. We must also consider the modalities of our field presence and our ability to work in close cooperation with all our partners.

This is why I noted with considerable interest the increasing emphasis in your speeches on the need for a UNESCO presence at country level. Like you, I believe that its presence must be increased, alongside the United Nations Country Teams, for it is the essential counterpart to our global mandate. Achieving the right balance between these two levels of responsibility and action, while taking account of developments in the reform of the United Nations system, will be the major challenge in the years to come.

As I have often pointed out, UNESCO cannot succeed alone. Very fortunately, it now has an incomparable resource base of partners, both public and private, which it can effectively mobilize in the service of the Member States.

At the Forum of Funding Partners, the latter also urged that their action be included in the framework of the United Nations reform and that new synergies between their different networks be developed, especially at the local level. This message is very encouraging.

I am deeply convinced that UNESCO, in its battle for a better sharing of knowledge, will indeed need to draw effectively on its various networks of expertise, know-how and knowledge. These networks, let it be said again, must not be viewed merely as forms of action, but on the contrary as decisive instruments of cooperation conducive to the emergence of genuinely democratic, pluralistic and inclusive knowledge societies.

Mr President,

In the course of this past week, speakers at the highest level of government across the world have expressed the concerns and aspirations of their people for a fairer and more equitable world. In so doing, they have reaffirmed the vitality and enduring significance of UNESCO's actions on their behalf. You may be sure that the Secretariat will continue to strive for excellence in fulfilling those expectations.

I am convinced that the many rich ideas and perspectives raised during this general policy debate will guide the work of the specialized Commissions over the coming weeks, as they will UNESCO's action for the next two years. I shall be following the Commissions' deliberations very closely, and look forward to addressing you again in plenary after their work is completed.

In conclusion, allow me to express my fervent belief that now, more than ever, is a time to look resolutely ahead and to strengthen the ties that bind us through greater global solidarity. Never before has there been a greater need to invest in education, the sciences, culture and communication. Never before has there been a greater need for UNESCO.

Thank you very much for your attention.