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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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

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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
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联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mrs Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the World Innovation Summit  
for Education (WISE)**

**Doha, Qatar, 16 November 2009**

Your Highness,  
Distinguished guests,  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is highly opportune that this World Innovation Summit for Education is my first public speaking engagement since becoming Director-General of UNESCO. Let me begin by respectfully thanking Your Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned for this invitation. We had the honour of meeting last month in Paris during our General Conference. You are an eloquent advocate of the right to education as our delegates had the opportunity to witness first hand during your stirring address. As UNESCO's Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education, you have consistently demonstrated courage, generosity and conviction in your words and actions. You have contributed to ensuring that where education is in crisis and under attack, we take action to protect it. UNESCO looks forward to close and continued engagement with you to extend the right to education to every child, youth and adult.

I warmly welcome this initiative by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. The Foundation's work is a further illustration of your commitment to advance educational practice worldwide through promoting innovation and high-level dialogue. Such sharing of knowledge across lands and oceans stands as one of the greatest hallmarks of Islamic civilization; it has shaped our scientific, cultural and artistic heritage. The ambition to promote international

cooperation and understanding is likewise, as you know, at the heart of UNESCO's mission.

This Summit offers a unique contemporary platform to reflect on today's global education challenges. The topic of global education and sustainability is intricately linked to innovation, our overarching theme. Education for the 21st century requires profound innovations because our world is increasingly complex, integrated, fluid and knowledge driven. In this context, it is essential to encourage a critical and ongoing dialogue on the purposes of education, what people learn, why and how. Is education empowering individuals and giving them the skills, knowledge and values to lead fulfilling lives? Does education promote peace, understanding and more just and sustainable societies? These are the questions we must answer.

Education is a cornerstone of the new humanism that I am advocating. It is a universal vision rooted in a profound respect for human dignity, fundamental rights and the diversity of cultures. We share a human condition, we share a planet – we are connected and dependent on each other whether from close or far. Because of this, I have a natural responsibility to actively look out and care for my fellow human being. From this perspective, education is about personal and mutual enrichment and the promotion of social justice. It is about breaking down social and cultural barriers and endowing every individual with the knowledge, respect and confidence to be engaged in their families, communities and nations as responsible citizens.

Education is UNESCO's top priority. Our Organization coordinates the global Education for All movement that aims to give every child, youth and adult quality learning opportunities. UNESCO leads the United Nations decades on literacy and on education for sustainable development. But with explicit mandates in culture, the sciences and communications, we take an interdisciplinary approach to educational issues. This perspective, I believe, is a source of enrichment in a world characterized by the increasing integration of all fields of knowledge.

I would like to share with you today several perspectives on why global education requires innovation, the principles that should underpin change, and how to ensure that policies are sustainable. The education systems we build today will shape the societies of tomorrow. Education is a lifetime pursuit and investment. As Islamic teachings tell us, "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave".

Education needs innovation for several reasons. The first is that the right to education is still not a reality for millions of individuals despite the impressive strides made since 2000. With political will and innovation, we hold the historic chance of enrolling all children in school.

The first barometer of an innovation's merit is the extent to which it opens the doors of learning to the most vulnerable and marginalized: the 75 million girls and boys who are still out of school and the staggering 800 million adults who lack basic literacy skills.

We know that exclusion has many faces. Children may not attend school because their families earn less than one or two dollars a day. They may be caught in distressful situations of conflict that destroy their entire social network and environment. But they may also be excluded simply because they are girls or women, because they speak a minority language, belong to a religious minority, an indigenous group, or live with a disability. Education cannot tolerate such discrimination – it violates all fundamental principles of human rights – from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a few days.

Second we require innovations to dramatically improve the quality of education at all levels. Developing countries face enormous pressure to hire teachers, build classrooms and schools to accommodate growing numbers of learners. But assessments from all regions point to serious shortcomings in learning achievement, which tend to be magnified by social disadvantage. If students are not learning, then our education systems are not effective and definitely not a wise investment. The costs can be measured in the short and long term, at the personal and social levels. They are very high. Knowledge is power; lack of knowledge keeps individuals locked in poverty with little ability to envision the future.

We cannot speak about quality without those who make education happen – teachers. They are a top priority for UNESCO. No innovation can work without training teachers – the women and men who bring learning and knowledge to life and can exercise such a determining influence on our future. We need to value these women and men, reward them and provide them with adequate training and professional development so that they can stand back, reflect on their practice and to improve it. The more diverse the student population becomes, the more skills

teachers need to make their classrooms inclusive and stimulating. So we need innovations to train more teachers in methods that encourage participation, team work, creative and critical thinking, and problem-solving.

There is a third and fundamental dimension of innovation that I would like to emphasize. Innovations must be grounded in ethical values – respect for one's own culture, respect for others and awareness of our interdependence. You have to know where you come from in order to reach out to others. You have to feel rooted and respected in your own culture in order to respect that of other people's. Daily educational practice is about cultivating this respect, about putting human rights and democratic principles into action in learning environments.

An ethical mindset also seeks to find solutions to the global challenges we face: climate change, hunger, shrinking water resources, endangered biodiversity and health epidemics. Education must engender a culture of sharing and responsibility towards our planet. It must open hearts and minds. Promoting peace and respect rather than conflict and competition is imperative if we are to improve the human condition.

Finally we need innovations because the world is undergoing profound and rapid transformation. Technology continues to drive integration, revolutionize how we communicate and calls for new skills, from scientific to media literacy. Growing numbers of people are migrating, often in search of a better life, making our societies ever more multicultural. The economic and financial crisis has brought into sharp focus the extreme vulnerability of the poorest and most marginalized groups. Unemployment has soared amongst youth and most acutely among those without qualifications. Innovations must be geared towards a fairer globalization. They must build bridges between the worlds of learning and of work, and be anchored in communities.

UNESCO has embarked over the past year on an ambitious reflection about the future shape of education through a cycle of major international conferences. They have focused on inclusion, education for sustainable development, higher education and next month, on adult learning and education in Belem, Brazil. Finally next September in Moscow, we shall be organizing the first world conference on early childhood care and education. Together these conferences promote a comprehensive and integrated vision of education that is a prerequisite for veritable

knowledge societies to emerge. We cannot have high quality innovations alongside high rates of child malnutrition or intolerable levels of illiteracy – especially female illiteracy.

What does it take for change to run deeply through education systems and make innovations sustainable? The starting point is unflinching political will – the recognition that education is central to human, social and economic development. Then you need the knowledge to implement change, the social dialogue to make sure policies are understood, the institutional environment to embed them, evaluation to assess results and last but not least, adequate financing.

Let me emphasize this last point. Sustained economic growth has enabled the expansion of education systems in developing countries over the past years, even with the large quality failings that I have mentioned. The economic and financial crisis radically changes this picture. Although countries appear to be protecting their education budgets we still do not know the real consequences of the crisis on enrolments, on teachers, on families and on learning opportunities. Education must be protected from the impact of the crisis. More than that, it must benefit from higher investment – both through domestic funds and development assistance.

Education for all will not be reached without sustainable and predictable funding. Development assistance has been instrumental in helping low-income countries to expand educational opportunities for all children. But the decline in aid to basic education observed in 2007 sends a negative signal. Aid remains far below what is needed to reach key education goals in low-income countries. Multilateral, bilateral and emerging donors as well as private foundations and corporations all have a stake in building strong, endogenous education systems because they are a foundation for global stability. It is our shared responsibility to be full partners in shaping effective and inclusive education systems. It is what UNESCO aims to be: a trusted partner that provides governments with sound policy advice, technical expertise and the know-how to address the overriding challenge of access and quality at all levels of education, in the formal and non-formal.

The economic and financial crisis is a warning call. Reinforced cooperation and solidarity is the only sustainable way out of the crisis. Knowledge has to be more widely shared through strategic alliances, learning networks and the harnessing of new technologies. Through North-South and South-South cooperation, including

platforms such as this Summit and UNESCO's specialized networks, we have the possibility to promote and scale up innovative practices.

Just over five years separate us from 2015 – the target date for achieving the Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. I am determined that we travel this road together. The challenges are vast and we must have the ambition and courage to innovate and the flexibility to adapt without losing sight of the fundamental ethos of education – to build peace in the minds of human beings, as UNESCO's founding Constitution states with enduring relevance.

Thank you for your attention.