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Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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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 Ms Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the UNESCO Forum on Haiti,  
Rebuilding the social, cultural  
and intellectual fabric of Haiti**

**UNESCO, 24 March 2010**

Madam Minister of Culture and Communication of Haiti,  
Mr M'Bow,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Dear Friends,

Let me begin by thanking you all for accepting the invitation of UNESCO – home to all cultures and today, home to Haiti. To our Haitian friends I should like to say “Welcome home” using the Creole expression: “la caye, cé la caye”.

Welcome also to our friends from Africa and all the other continents who, by their numerous shows of support, have sent “all the tenderness in the world” to the people of Haiti, as René Despestre, a former colleague of ours at UNESCO for many years, once said so aptly.

The incredible shock of 12 January 2010 when Haiti, barely recovering from recent hurricanes, was devastated by an earthquake, remains fresh in our minds.

We are all painfully aware of the scale of the tragedy and the countless victims and injuries it caused. Amid the loss of so many loved ones, an entire country must now tend its wounds. So many homes, public buildings and places where people lived, gathered, learned and prayed have been destroyed. The people of Haiti, their history and memory, have been cruelly battered.

We all saw the cathedral in Port-au-Prince pulverized; libraries and museums destroyed; schools razed to the ground; the brand new Quisqueya University reduced to ruins. The lines of René Depestre spontaneously come to mind:

“Beyond the shipwrecked vines

beyond the gutted houses

and dreams that have gone up in smoke,

beyond eyes that have been lost everything,

beyond lives humiliated by the rain,

upon the mind’s most piercing wound

healing tenderness works:

innocent birds learn once more

how to sing among the silent”.

This moving poem, so very pertinent today, calls forth the distress as well as the hope that is re-emerging in Haiti.

The people of Haiti – like each one of us and like all peoples – are masters of their own destiny. Sometimes, though, we truly need the help and generosity of others to regain the strength of hope. January’s tragedy is one of those times. The international community reached out to Haiti in an extraordinary show of solidarity in the belief that our world is a planetary village where we are all connected, linked and responsible.

This is especially true for the steadfast Haitian diaspora, which quickly demonstrated the strength of its ties with the homeland and fervently came to its rescue. This is only the beginning. We all wish to do our duty as morally and materially committed human beings.

As you are aware, as soon as news of the earthquake reached us, I decided that UNESCO would intervene immediately in its fields of competence to support the population and the Haitian Government in facing the terrible ordeal. With our experience in dealing with natural disasters, we joined forces with other United Nations agencies, Member States and NGOs to provide assistance to Haiti.

I created a crisis cell to coordinate all aspects of the Organization's response. In particular I took as many measures as possible, together with other specialized agencies, to try and prevent the pillaging and trafficking of art which unfortunately occurs after these kinds of disasters.

I also launched a fundraising campaign for Haiti as early as 14 January. The spirit of generosity was unanimous. I wish to thank all the donors and partners, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Israel, Japan, the Latin America and the Caribbean group and the Africa group for their swift response and their material and financial contributions. I would also like to thank the UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors who were willing to the face of this campaign, for example on the Internet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On 16 February at a meeting held here at Headquarters and chaired by you, Madam Minister of Culture and Communication of Haiti, we laid the foundations of an International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Haitian Cultural Heritage in order to use UNESCO's resources and expertise as effectively as possible in assisting the Haitian Government in its strategy to rebuild the country as closely as possible to what it envisioned.

I also decided to go to Haiti on 9 March to see for myself what was needed and, with the Government, study ways in which UNESCO could provide assistance in the fields of culture, education, science and communication. Above all, however, I went to Port-au-Prince and other regions to show all Haitians that they had my unwavering support and that of UNESCO.

Everywhere I went, I was deeply touched by the dignity and moral fortitude of the extraordinarily courageous people I met – men and women who looked to the future and joined together in hope.

When I went to Jacmel, I admired the craftworkers who, despite the widespread destruction of their city, had been able to start preparing the 2011 Carnival with the assistance of UNESCO. I also admired students at the School of Fine Arts painting amid the rubble of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. At Camp Perrin I watched workshops held there to teach masons earthquake-resistant construction techniques for inexpensive, safer homes.

Life goes on and Haiti looks to the future. This determination is but further proof of the invincible strength of the people of Haiti.

I am deeply moved by the account of Haitian author Evelyne Trouillot, who said: “I hear humanity survive in the voices around me [...] Voices full of dignity who say that life must not be lived on one’s knees but standing and only standing – we must get up quickly and meet it head on.”

During my trip to Haiti, I saw that the Haitian culture, identity and spirit were alive and well. I also sensed the presence of a vibrant and dynamic civil society. These deeply anchored values have allowed Haitians to surmount the successive natural and historical tragedies it has known. This nobility deserves our respect. Haiti stands proud of its struggles and bravery, and of being the first black republic in history, declaring independence over two centuries ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The solidarity expressed in Haiti, stronger than ever against nature’s violence, has become a wave of international support. However complicated the required response may be, we share the same goal of making international efforts work, by freely giving Haiti what it needs to build the Haiti of tomorrow. I am fully convinced that to make this new Haiti prosperous and fair, the country’s social, cultural and intellectual fabric must be rewoven. Today’s challenges may in fact be an opportunity to move towards the future.

We all know however that Haiti can only be rebuilt if we completely reinvent our approach. Beyond the emergency humanitarian aid provided today, it is of course essential to think of the longer term. We are here today to think clearly and creatively about the most effective way possible of rebuilding the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of Haiti. This fabric is alive and present and needs only to be

revitalized. By rebuilding we are not rewriting but carrying further a unique history made sometimes of sound and fury but sometimes of achievements and wisdom as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends from Haiti and the Haitian diaspora,

Intellectuals, artists, authors, journalists, political leaders and international experts: from vastly different backgrounds, you are here today under the auspices of UNESCO to discuss how Haiti can best be steered towards what can be called sustainable development.

The starting point for these discussions is the assumption that Haiti must be in full control of its own reconstruction, based on what represents the very essence of the country – its culture and identity. These timeless conductors are the most resistant, the most precious.

Embedded in culture is an infinite spectrum of intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual fundamentals. Culture encompasses lifestyles, value systems, arts and literature, ways of living together, languages, traditions and beliefs. For this reason, development strategies must at all costs be formulated with culture in mind and make the active participation of every community possible if not essential. They must promote knowledge and know-how.

There is no doubt in my mind that considering such an important dimension as culture has become an imperative. Confirming this position, which UNESCO vigorously defends, before discussions began was important to me.

Today, focusing on positive, long-term progress in Haiti, we will work together to find concrete, objective and rational ways of bringing culture up to the same level as economics and finance.

A first step was taken last week when culture was integrated into a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment as a cross-cutting sector. This first form of recognition is a beginning. Efforts are now needed to secure financing for culture.

We want our message to be heard and remembered. For many reasons, Haiti is a test for humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Haiti needed and still needs humanitarian assistance; but let me restate the importance of now going further and preparing the future. I am fully aware of the immensity of this task.

On the one hand we must save or reconstruct the built heritage public buildings, homes, schools and museums. On the other, we must once again make culture a nexus, a catalyst in Haitian society, as well as, no doubt, a driver of growth for the country.

It would of course be very useful to develop cultural tourism, which could contribute significantly to the economy. The performing arts and creative industries such as publishing, video, cinema and crafts could do much to stimulate the economy. The media also requires special attention due to the important role they play in terms of social cohesion.

Education is the linchpin (or as you would say in beautiful Créole the 'potomitan') in the restoration and reconstruction of Haiti. Education, culture, science and communication are closely linked and cannot really be dissociated from one another. These themes represent essential needs in building a new Haiti.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task before you is vast. You must exchange views in detail on the best suited and most effective ways of revitalizing Haiti's social, cultural and intellectual fabric as a source of memories, history and the future and a vibrant, solid basis for fair, sustainable and harmonious development for the country. It is that commonly shared vision which we must build upon today and which, I hope, will lead to powerful recommendations.

The recommendations that emerge from today's Forum are extremely important: they will be included in the proposal UNESCO will submit to the International

Donor's Conference towards a New Future for Haiti, to be held on 31 March at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

I shall defend the academic, social and cultural sphere as a central and indispensable feature of the reconstruction and rebirth of Haiti in order to persuade donors to invest specifically in culture. I am sure you will use your diverse and complementary sources of creativity to draft convincing recommendations to which everyone will adhere.

As for myself, I can assure you that I will devote a great amount of energy to representing the message you entrust to me today. The message of Haiti.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the end of the Forum the spotlight will shine on living Haitian culture. We will have the privilege of watching Melovivi ("The Trap" in Créole), a play by Frankétienne, an iconic figure of Haitian culture.

Before this performance, I encourage you to attend the ceremony scheduled before lunch, during which I will make Frankétienne a UNESCO Artist for Peace. I would like to enlist this artist to work with us to raise awareness about the future of his country. By honouring this pillar of Haitian culture, UNESCO honours everyone in the creative world in Haiti.

I should like to close with the words of the sociologist Arjun Appadurai, who said: "Culture is the resource that society needs to move from today to tomorrow."

Thank you very much.