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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of the World Poetry Day**

21 March 2017

We have not wings, we cannot soar;

But we have feet to scale and climb

By slow degrees, by more and more,

The cloudy summits of our time.

At a time when the challenges we face – from climate change, inequality and poverty to violent extremism – seem so steep, the words of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow give us hope.

Arranged in words, coloured with images, struck with the right meter, poetry has a power that has no match. This is the power to shake us from everyday life and to remind us of the beauty that surrounds us and the resilience of the shared human spirit.

Poetry is a window onto the breath-taking diversity of humanity. UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes dozens of forms of oral expression and poetry, from the Tsiattista poetic duelling of Cyprus, the Ca trù sung poetry of Viet Nam and Al-Taghrooda to the traditional Bedouin chanted poetry of Oman and the United Arab Emirates. As old as language itself, poetry remains more vital than ever, in a time of turbulence, as a source of hope, as a way to share what it means to live in this world.

The poet Pablo Neruda wrote, “poetry is an act of peace.” Poetry is unique in its ability to speak across time, space and culture, to reach directly the hearts of people everywhere. This is a wellspring for dialogue and understanding – this has always been a force to challenge injustice and advance freedom. As UNESCO’s new *Goodwill Ambassador for Artistic Freedom and Creativity*, Deeyah Khan, has said, all art, including poetry, “has the extraordinary capacity to express resistance and rebellion, protest and hope.”

Poetry is not a luxury.

It lies at the heart of who we are as women and men, living together today, drawing on the heritage of past generations, custodians of the world for our children and grandchildren.

By celebrating poetry today, we celebrate our ability to join together, in a spirit of solidarity, to scale and climb “the cloudy summits of our time.” We need this to take forward the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, to implement the *Paris Climate Agreement*, to ensure no woman or man is left behind.

Irina Bokova