The contribution of Education, at all levels and stages, to the Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations.

by

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Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to participate in this important and timely Symposium, which has been jointly organized by the Government of Yemen and UNESCO.

I have consciously described the Symposium as important because in addition to myself, the Chairman of the Executive Board and the Director-General Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura have an intimate knowledge of it and send their warm wishes. And when I say timely, I am thinking of two points. For one, I am referring to the way in which the dialogue has assumed a growing significance over the past few years as a vehicle in international relations, and has hence become a tool for enhanced mutual understanding, tolerance and peace – and mutual engagement. Secondly, it is timely because it is the first regional event following a landmark resolution by the UNESCO General Conference, adopted last October, where all Member States agreed that the dialogue activities must be intensified and concretised within the framework of the New Delhi Declaration. This New Delhi Declaration was adopted at the conclusion of the very first International Ministerial Conference on the subject, held in Delhi in July 2003.

When I stress the importance of the event, it is because the Arab region, more than ever, needs - and indeed merits - a thorough and informed debate about itself and its relationship to other regions, peoples, cultures and civilizations. The region may also wish to reflect about concrete action and activities it can launch itself and together
with other regions to advance – on a medium- and long-term basis – the objectives of the dialogue among civilisations, especially through education, the sciences, cultural heritage and communication. This endeavour is especially relevant at a moment in time when old forms of ignorance, prejudice and misconception about “who we are” and “who they are” are clearly on the return in new, sometimes unpleasant disguises and become “new ignorances”, so to speak.

I also wish to congratulate the organizers of this Symposium for having selected Yemen, and the beautiful capital of Sana’a, as the venue for the event. We indeed need to be surrounded by, and hence reminded of, the rich cultural heritage of the Arab world as a cherished part of our common cultural heritage. It is thus no accident that this historic city of Sana’a, which is also inscribed on UNESCO’s world heritage list, has been designated by the Arab leaders as Arab cultural capital for 2004. Our warmest congratulation are therefore being extended to the citizens and government of Yemen for this distinction and honor.

I am gratified that so many outstanding personalities and eminent experts and intellectuals have accepted the invitation and come to Sana’a to discuss and - I hope - critically analyse, a series of burning topics. The information folder (brochure) presenting the conceptual background for the Symposium clearly sets the stage for your debates by stating that:

“…the Arab region is now undergoing a period of crucial and painful transformations brought about by the current economic and geo-political situation. Dialogue has become, more than ever, a necessity in order to overcome the difficulties arising from this painful transformation. Real progress, in this sense, can only be achieved by broadening and deepening dialogue”. 
Faced with these new situations – and indeed with a recurrent feeling of powerlessness in many instances - we have recently witnessed the resurgence of notion of a «clash of civilizations», the so-called Huntington thesis in international debates. Much has been said, and can be said – and probably will be said in the coming days - about this thesis; let me here just emphasize one point, which I think is very important to keep in mind:

Many contemporary conflicts; which are defined by some as a “clash of civilization” often have very little – if anything – to do with what could be called a genuine civilizational clash. There are today several ongoing conflicts both within nation states and within societies and communities, also among nations, but they can by no means be framed as conflicts between civilizations – this would be a gross oversimplification of normal arguments and passing disagreements. No civilization, indeed no identity – is as bounded, homogenous, closed and “frozen” as the clash perspective propounds.

At the same time we must not be blind to the fact that the coming of globalization presents diversity with new challenges – and opens up sometimes space for disputes and frictions, if not fractures. Globalization is often seen as an upheaval and as conveying a threat of marginalization for some cultures, particularly the most vulnerable. Only dialogue and mutual understanding can bring about peaceful advances to the benefit of all.

This recognition led to the adoption by the 31st session of the General Conference in November 2001 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. For the first time cultural diversity was recognized as “the common heritage of humanity”, and its defence considered as an ethical and concrete imperative inseparable from respect for human dignity.
At its 166th session, UNESCO’s Executive Board decided to adopt, by acclamation, a resolution inviting the Director-General to submit to the 33rd session of the general Conference “a preliminary report setting forth the position with regard to the problem to be regulated and to the possible scope of the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions”. The resolution places emphasis, moreover, on the need for formal consultations with the concerned international bodies (UNCTAD, WTO and WIPO).

An initial meeting of experts on the first draft of the International Convention met in UNESCO from 17-20 last December, and a second meeting is foreseen for March 2004. I invite you to follow these developments very closely, because the linkage between “cultural diversity” and the “dialogue among cultures and civilizations” is not minor. On the contrary, the quest for dialogue among civilizations must always be based on universally shared values while also safeguarding the diversity of individuals and cultures.

Moreover, the promotion of dialogue must be aimed at benefiting the immediate and pressing needs of disadvantaged and excluded groups or geographical regions. Solidly anchored in democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, dialogue is the key because only through genuine dialogue can lasting relations of understanding, reconciliation and peace be achieved.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The commitment to dialogue is clearly more than an academic exercise. At the same time, however, there is nothing more determinant for a successful dialogue than knowledge. And knowledge is primarily obtained through education. Education at all levels – through formal, non-formal and informal approaches – has an inherent ability to release the potential of dialogue, provided it is accessible to
all. Education’s contribution to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity is therefore both undeniable and crucial.

First of all, contemporary educational programmes must not focus on differences, thereby “exotizing” them, but on the ways in which diversity can enrich our lives and on “Learning to Live Together”, the fourth pillar of education for the twenty-first century identified in the famous report by Jacques Delors.

A key modality for enhancing the understanding of the other is the improvement and revision of textbooks and teaching materials and the training of teachers. Revisions should aim to provide impartial, dispassionate and comprehensive knowledge about cultures and civilizations. The continuous re-questioning of assumptions and erring projections in relation to other people is an important exercise – for all of us. However, it is particularly crucial in conflict and post-conflict situations, where forums for research and dialogue among concerned specialists - historians, social scientists, and experts on religions and literature, for example - must be given special attention and support.

The formulation of educational policies and strategies that promote cultural and linguistic diversity throughout the curriculum are likewise a central part of textbook revision processes. Everyone should be enable to find their place in the community - in most cases local, to which they primarily belong - and at the same time be given the means to open out to other communities, values, belief systems and faiths.

Moreover, focus on human rights education and civic education is essential, especially in situations where the process of textbook revision and educational reform form part of reconstruction and reconciliation processes and where it can encourage students belonging to different communities to develop a new sense of shared destiny.
But education must also answer the crucial question as to what for and why we live together and give everyone, throughout life, the ability to play an active part in envisioning the future of society. To safeguard independence of conscience, education in general, from childhood throughout life, must also build up a critical sense that makes for free thought an independent action. It is thus education in general, as a process for constructing the faculty of judgement that is being called into action.

This is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks that education can take on board today, when stigmatising and generalizing categories like “Islam” and “the West” – or the West and the Rest - are spilling over almost on a daily basis in conference halls, newspapers, and pretentious academic debates. UNESCO captures all these activities in education under the term “focus on quality education”. It is not only the output and performance of an educational system that counts but also, and often more importantly, the qualitative input.

In this, and most other, processes in which UNESCO engages, dialogue is key. We wish to see the dialogue among civilizations and cultures become an effective instrument of transformation, a yardstick for peace and tolerance, and a vehicle for diversity and pluralism. And as I emphasized in the beginning of my presentation, our Member States are turning to UNESCO as never before, highlighting the Organization’s unique role in building new bridges between civilizations and cultures.

In conclusion, let me share with you a passage from the “Message from Ohrid” – the text, which concluded the international conference held in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia last August and which was attended by eight Heads of State of South-East Europe. I personally appreciate this passage very much. It reads:
“... a new era is dawning where dialogue, understanding and reconciliation are poised to replace the tribulations of history and where unity can be found in and nourished through the rich diversity and humanity of the peoples. Forgiveness will help rid the region from the biases and ignorances of the past... Drawing lessons from history; we agree that reconciliation is the path for our common future. Dialogue must become a new refrain that will echo throughout the region and the world at large.”

I am convinced that the Symposium of Sana’a will be an important contribution to this vision and I wish you much success with your deliberations.