

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

**Intervention by H. E. Professor Michael Omolewa,
President of the General Conference,
and Permanent Delegate of Nigeria to UNESCO**

at the opening of the 169th session of the Executive Board

Tuesday, 20 April 2004

Chairman of the Executive Board,
Director-General,
Distinguished members of the Board,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to address the Executive Board at this 169th session.

Almost fifty-eight years ago, at 3.00pm on Tuesday, 26th November 1946, the Executive Board began its first meeting. If we cast our minds back to that event, we might be able to imagine the difficult conditions under which our predecessors met for the first time. They met in the aftermath of a terrible war of global dimension and horrifying consequences. They met in the very heart of a continent living in a sinister post war climate, among ruins and with a large part of the rest of the world still under the shackles of colonialism.

I am sure, however, that the first members of the Board had hope. Their work was based upon the vision beautifully laid out in the Preamble to our Constitution, which expresses a firm will to replace suspicion and mistrust with mutual knowledge, and which appeals to the equality, dignity and mutual respect of human beings in place of the ignorance, prejudice and inequality that contributed to making that terrible war possible.

The situation of the world has no doubt greatly changed since 1946. But the answers that we can and must find to the current problems are still based upon the same values. Indeed, it is only upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind that a lasting peace, in its broadest sense, can be built in

place of war and violence which, - we must recognize – still exist almost 60 years later.

In this connection, I should like to add my voice to all those which have been raised to condemn all acts of terrorism everywhere in the world, and to convey my condolences to all the victims especially those of the devastating attacks of 11 March in Madrid, for which my heartfelt solidarity goes to the authorities and the people of Spain.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the closure of the General Conference, I have had the opportunity to take the message of UNESCO to several parts of the world, participating in a number of meetings at the request of their organizers, whom I should like to thank warmly. Among these important occasions were the UN Literacy Decade Regional launch in Africa, at the occasion of the biennale meeting of the Association for the Development of Education (ADEA) held in Mauritius; the Education for All meeting in Abuja (Nigeria), the “Huitième rencontre de Carthage” in Tunisia, and the Expert meeting of the Preliminary Study of the Comprehensive Interregional Project of Traditional Bazaars which took place in Isfahan, Islamic Republic of Iran.

A great part of my endeavours have also been devoted to the follow-up to two important resolutions adopted by the Conference: I refer to the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition, proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations at the initiative of UNESCO, and to Dialogue among civilizations, particularly the new perspectives of the work of UNESCO therein as a follow-up to the Delhi Ministerial Conference.

I took part in the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of Slavery in Cuba and in the Dominican Republic shared views on the forthcoming First World Congress on Literacy in Cuba. My gratitude to the authorities of these two founding member states of UNESCO, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, for their warm welcome.

I had the pleasure to participate in the Colloquium on the Dialogue among civilizations and cultures which took place in Sana'a, Yemen, in February 2004. This timely meeting was an important step forward in UNESCO's activities relating to the Dialogue, and I should like to congratulate and thank the authorities of the Republic of Yemen for the organization of this Symposium jointly with UNESCO.

Also within the framework of the Dialogue among civilizations, the Informal Forum of Permanent Delegates - an important initiative of my distinguished predecessor, Ambassador Jalali - held a meeting on 16 February. Honoured by your presence, Mr Chairman, some 40 Permanent Delegates had the opportunity to get acquainted with the Delhi follow-up activities presented by the Secretariat, and to discuss ways and means to translate into action the wide-ranging reflection undertaken by the Organization on this subject. I was pleased to transmit the minutes of this meeting for information to all Permanent Delegates and to the Director-General, thus fulfilling the wish expressed by many member States that the informal debate held at the Forum, while not having any official standing, may be of use for policy formulation and for the deliberation of the governing bodies.

I am keen to pursue the meetings of the Informal Forum to further enhance the quality of dialogue in this House and will be grateful for any

suggestion in this regard, specially as concerns subjects to be taken up in the Forum. It is imperative for us all to continue to seek and use available opportunities to reflect and speak out on issues aimed at promoting further relevance and greater efficiency of our Organization. As late Martin Luther King Jr once pointed out - I quote - “a time comes when silence is betrayal”.

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Comme vous le savez, la Conférence générale m’a prié, par sa Résolution 32 C/81, «de constituer, en consultation avec le Directeur général et le Président du Conseil exécutif, un groupe de travail ad hoc chargé d’examiner les relations entre les trois organes de l’UNESCO et de recommander les moyens les plus efficaces de renforcer les rôles respectifs de la Conférence générale et du Conseil exécutif...».

Permettez-moi de revenir à la première réunion du Conseil exécutif en novembre 1946. Qu’est-ce que nous trouvons inscrit à l’ordre du jour du Conseil exécutif? Un point libellé comme suit: relations entre le Conseil exécutif et le Directeur général.

En effet, la gouvernance de l’Organisation, qui trouve son expression la plus visible et la plus importante dans la relation entre la Conférence générale, le Conseil exécutif et le Secrétariat, a toujours été au cœur de nos préoccupations. Et c’est normal et légitime qu’il en soit ainsi, car l’évolution même de l’Organisation exige un effort constant d’adaptation. Cependant, force est de constater que cette problématique a été particulièrement présente lors du passé récent de l’Organisation. Des grands progrès ont été accomplis suite au travail en profondeur réalisé par le groupe ad hoc présidé par l’un de mes illustres prédécesseurs, Monsieur Torven Krogh, à qui je tiens à rendre hommage.

D'autres questions ont pourtant surgi pendant les dernières années, qui ont fait l'objet de longs débats à la Conférence générale et au sein même de ce Conseil exécutif.

L'occasion semble plus propice que jamais, alors que la réforme du Secrétariat entamée avec fermeté par le Directeur général commence à donner des fruits, pour trouver des solutions appropriées et durables aux problèmes soulevés dans le cadre des relations entre les trois organes de l'UNESCO. Et c'est dans ce contexte que la Conférence générale a décidé de mettre en place le plus vaste spectre de qualités possible en réunissant 18 experts dont la connaissance approfondie et diversifiée et la longue expérience de l'Organisation seraient autant d'atouts pour trouver des réponses appropriées à ces problèmes persistants.

Chers amis, je dois vous dire dans ce contexte que je regrette profondément que la composition du groupe de travail ait donné lieu à certaines difficultés. J'estime qu'il serait malheureux que tous les groupes électoraux ne soient pas représentés à leur entière satisfaction au sein du groupe. C'est pourquoi j'ai continué les consultations afin de trouver une formule qui puisse faire l'accord de tous. C'est dans cet esprit que j'ai rencontré, ce matin-même, la Présidente du Groupe Latino-Américain et des Caraïbes. Je suis heureux de vous informer que le dialogue se poursuit dans la bonne voie et que j'espère que nous arriverons à trouver ensemble une solution adéquate pour sortir de cette impasse.

Comme vous le savez, le groupe de travail ad hoc tiendra sa première réunion le 30 avril prochain immédiatement après la clôture de cette 169^e session du Conseil exécutif. Les réunions du groupe seront - à moins que ses membres en décident autrement - ouvertes aux représentants de tous les Etats membres. J'espère sincèrement pouvoir compter sur la participation et le soutien

de vous tous. Tel que la Conférence générale l'a décidé, le rapport du groupe de travail sera présenté au Conseil exécutif lors de sa 171^e session. Ce rapport, qui sera sans doute riche et pertinent, sera ensuite présenté - accompagné des commentaires du Conseil - à la Conférence générale lors de sa 33^e session.

Mr Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A Bantu proverb says, "He who travels alone dies alone". UNESCO is certainly not travelling alone, less now than ever with the renewal of membership of some of its founding Member States.

The members of our Executive Board are not travelling alone either, but closely together all 58 – or even 59 if I may humbly count myself among you in my *ex officio* quality. Let us hope that our travel together, not only during the two coming weeks, but for the two years ahead will be based on a shared spirit of dialogue, trust and consensus building. You may count on me at every moment to join hands with you for the fulfilment of the hope and wishes expressed by the General Conference.

Indeed, it would be my personal joy, as well as the happy culmination of my duty as President of the General Conference, to be able to report on the years 2004 and 2005 as a most creative and productive period in the history of the Organization. I am confident that UNESCO, with its reinforced membership and under the Director-General's leadership, within the framework of a revitalized Secretariat, and a forceful, determined and resourceful Executive Board will make this unfolding biennium live up to that expectation.

I thank you for your attention.