



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

## **Executive Board**

### **One hundred and eighty-first session**

#### **Opening address**

**by His Excellency Mr Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai**

**Chair of the Executive Board of UNESCO**

**UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**20 April 2009**

Mr President of the General Conference,  
Ladies and Gentlemen Members of the Executive Board,  
Mr Director-General,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and Friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first of all to bid a warm welcome, on your behalf and in my own name, to the new members of our family, namely, the representatives of Saudi Arabia, Colombia, the United States of America, Ethiopia, Russian Federation, Nepal and Portugal. I should like to take this opportunity too to pay tribute to the valuable contribution their predecessors made to the work of the Board.

I should also like to present my condolences to and express our solidarity with all the States Members of our Organization which have suffered natural disasters in recent times.

Dear colleagues,

If I was asked to describe in a couple of words the period of time between the last session of the Board and the one we are starting today, I would say, without having to think twice: HOPE, DESPITE ...

The crisis, which we must stop trying to qualify as it has invaded every aspect of the daily life of humanity, seems to be settling in; despite the courageous measures taken to date to mitigate its financial dimension, it would be risky and rash to predict its imminent end.

The crisis is thus the backdrop to our daily lot of famine, unprecedented forms of violence and terrorist attacks. And if all that were not enough to make us ashamed of what we call our “modern civilization”, along come events and situations we believed to be of another age, such as piracy on the high seas, and the unacceptable carnage in Gaza, which reminds us of the most typical old-style behaviour of the colonial era.

We might be tempted to believe then, not without reason, that our age, to put it in the poetic words of Rubén Darío, combines “al culto de Hércules el culto de Mammón” [the worship of Hercules with the worship of Mammon]. Happily, though, all is not pessimism, and even though:

***La tierra está preñada de dolor tan profundo  
que el soñador, imperial meditabundo  
sufre con las angustias del corazón del mundo,***

.....

***La noche anuncia el día***

.....

***aún guarda la Esperanza la caja de Pandora.***

These lines too are by the great Latin-American poet Rubén Darío who said, in another collection:

***“Hay en mi sangre alguna gota de sangre de***

***África, o de indio chorotega o nagrandano?”***

And they are taken from his work, the aptly titled “**Cantos de Vida y Esperanza**”. I wanted especially to share them with you because they refer us, inevitably, to the hope raised throughout the world by the election of Barack Hussein Obama, an African American, to the office of President of the United States of America. The prophetic words of Césaire spring to mind:

***“La relance ici se fait,***

***Par le vent qui d’Afrique vient”.***

Our Organization has every reason to be proud of this election and to see it as a victory, its victory, because UNESCO can take pride in having designed and

implemented, even before President Obama was born, programmes to combat racism, racial discrimination and race-based prejudice. It summoned the concepts of “race” and racial superiority to the court of science, to discredit and denounce them.

At the 162nd session of the Board, which followed the attacks of 11 September 2001, I invited the Members of the Board to take for themselves, as a sign of solidarity, the famous lines of the well-known African-American poet Langston Hughes:

***I too am America.***

And as the election of Barack Hussein Obama reconciles America with itself, and with the world, it invites to say, in solidarity, “I too am America”, and gives us “the audacity of hope” for the real return of the United States to this Organization.

It is then, ladies and gentlemen, against this backdrop of HOPE DESPITE that we must examine the various items on the agenda of the 181st session. We must discuss important issues, such as:

- the integrated comprehensive strategy for category 2 institutes and centres;
- the Draft Programme and Budget for 2010-2011 (35 C/5);
- preparation of the 35th session of the General Conference;
- continuation of consideration of the procedure to be followed for the nomination of the Director-General of the Organization;
- the projects for the reconstruction and restoration of Gaza in the fields of education, science, culture and communication;
- the long-term strategy aimed at reinforcing the Slave Route project;

without forgetting a thematic debate that highlights Africa, our priority area, and harmonious cooperation with our partners in achieving the education for all goals. The documents submitted to you on these items are on the whole solid and I know that you will consider them with the critical spirit for which you are known, bearing in mind at the same time the ideal of consensus decisions.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

This is the third and penultimate session of the biennium. It seems to me then that the time has now come to start to look to the future and consider the problems linked to the life and/or the nature of our Organization, and the tasks conferred upon it in the overall context of today's world and the challenges it has laid before us. These problems are many, of course, and varied. I feel that two of them demand immediate attention. They are:

1. **Reflection on global governance**, and
2. What I propose calling, without wishing to be alarmist, **the existential crisis of UNESCO**.

The two themes are obviously linked and I cannot pretend, in the present context, to do more than alert you to them, as these are complex issues that call for collective, pluralist, and long-standing reflection. Allow me then to share with you some preliminary thoughts. It is said that charity begins at home, so I should like to start with the existential crisis. It has several facets. I will look at two of them only, the most obvious. I am referring to the Headquarters-field hiatus, and the constant erosion of the regular budget in favour of voluntary contributions.

The Director-General has formulated and implemented relevant and bold administrative reform designed to make UNESCO present and visible in the field of operations alongside our Member States. It must today be recognized that this reform is at best half successful. And while the part that is successful is the work of the Director-General, the part that has failed may be explained by the combined forces of inertia and resistance from a section of the Secretariat, and the lack of support from Member States. We should have the courage to admit that we have never made available to the Director-General resources matching his ambitions, even though we claim to share them. For instance, he has never been able to send to the field the critical mass of specialists needed to make visible changes in Member States. Almost everywhere I have visited in the eighteen months I have been Chair of the Board, I have always been met with the same story: the field is stigmatized, looked down on, neglected, starved of resources. I have also, fortunately, been met with stories of faith in the Organization, heroism and professionalism at work both because and in spite of the lack of resources. This is therefore, unless we can find a prompt and

satisfactory solution, a situation that could endanger the very life of the Organization. Indeed, I propose, at the next session and in consultation with the Director-General, to invite two field units to come and tell the Board about their successes, problems and challenges, using the media of their choice.

Time is too short for me to talk in detail about the imbalance between extrabudgetary contributions and contributions to the regular budget to the detriment of the latter, other than to note, forcefully, that if current trends are confirmed, UNESCO will soon become an organization where only the “big contributors” of extrabudgetary funds have a say. It will thus be going against the ideals which presided over its foundation, signalling the demise of multilateralism. Therefore we must think and react. Intellectual honesty compels me to admit that in my view, we have already entered the phase of managing hardship and decline. Now is the time that we must start to think. That is what I have to say about this house.

You will recall, dear colleagues, that I said, before Mr Ban Ki Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, that UNESCO’s role is to think global governance. That is why the Organization was founded. We come to the rescue of the system especially when the economic machine runs out of steam, as it clearly has today. It is thus a matter of urgency to set up a long-term working group on global governance. I hope that a State or group of States will seize on this worthy proposal, and that the Organization, as of this session, will give it the attention it warrants.

It only remains for me to thank you for your patience. I consider it to be the duty of the Chair of the Board to come up with provocative ideas, not to hide certain truths, and to organize consensus. Our device must always be TRUTHS (in the plural) and CONSENSUS. A great thinker, Jaime Torres Bodet, had a proverbial saying: “***the other name for UNESCO is truth***”. It is with this excellent motto that I wish you a good session, one which is sure to be enriched by the visits of H.E. Dr Thomas Boni Yayi, President of the Republic of Benin, and H.E. Mr Jorge Sampaio, High Representative of the United Nations for the Alliance of Civilizations.

Thank you for your kind attention.