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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International launch of the United Nations Decade on
Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)

United Nations Headquarters, New York, 1 March 2005

Mrs Annan,
Dr Arima, representative of the Government of Japan for DESD Affairs,
Mrs Rima Salah, Deputy executive Director of UNICEF,
Professor Rockefeller,
Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Colleagues from the UN system,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to address you on the occasion of the launch of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), 2005-2014. Let me first say how delighted I am to be joined at this event by Mrs Nane Annan, wife of the UN Secretary-General; I know this is a subject she cares about deeply and I very much appreciate her interest and support.

I am very pleased to see that all four members of the High-Level Panel that I convened to advise UNESCO on the Decade are with us here today: President Konaré, who heads the Commission of the African Union; Mr Carl Lindberg of Sweden; Dr Arima, who is representing the Japanese Government, which sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution establishing the Decade; and Professor Steven Rockefeller, who kindly moderated the Expert Panel held earlier this afternoon. Dr Arima and Professor Rockefeller will also speak at this launching ceremony, as will Mrs Rima Salah, who represents our sister agency UNICEF.

At the heart of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is a simple idea with complex implications, namely, after being taught over past centuries to live unsustainably, we now have to learn to live sustainably. And the greatest part of this challenge, I believe, is to learn the lessons of interdependence. These take three main forms.

First, we need to recognize the reality of our interdependence within society and, in this age of accelerating globalization, between our societies. Having done so, we must then recognize that our interdependence implies not only an “is” but also an “ought”: we have to make choices and these are always laden with a moral dimension as well as practical interests. This is the first lesson of interdependence.

The second lesson is that our interdependence extends also to the relation between human society and the natural environment. We depend upon Nature for so many things and, in turn, Nature depends upon our care, wisdom and foresight. The intellectual, moral and cultural capacities of the human species impose responsibilities upon us towards other living creatures and to physical Nature too.

The third lesson is that there is an interdependence between the present and the future – between existing generations and all those to come. Again, there are responsibilities to learn and understand, especially given the fact that our current policies have long-term consequences. The needs of the future must educate our actions today.

The Decade, therefore, brings the spotlight on the central role of education and learning in the common pursuit of sustainable development. But what exactly is the Decade?

It is a framework of partnership and collaboration, bringing together a great diversity of interests and concerns. It is an instrument of mobilization and advocacy. And it is a vehicle of accountability through which governments, international organizations, civil society, the private sector and local communities around the world can demonstrate their practical commitment to learning to live sustainably.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a clearly tremendous challenge but it is one that we must all welcome and one that we must address together. For its part, UNESCO is delighted to have been designated by the United Nations General Assembly as the lead agency for promoting the Decade and for its international coordination. We shall do our utmost to fulfil this responsibility with all the energy, commitment and expertise it deserves. In this task, I am sure we can count on the broad ESD partnership to work closely with us.

In addition, UNESCO will be making its own programmatic contributions to ESD and the Decade, drawing not only upon its Education sector but also upon its other sectors: the Natural Sciences, the Social and Human Sciences, Culture, Information and Communication. All have important contributions to make, ranging from high-level science education to protecting intangible cultural heritage, from public awareness and preparedness regarding tsunamis to the renewal of school curricula.

We have made ESD a key aspect of our understanding of what the content of quality education in the 21st century should be about. This is one way in which the Decade links up with other areas of priority action in education, especially the drive for Education for All (EFA) and the UN Literacy Decade that was launched here two years ago. In addition, of course, the Decade is integrally connected with the global development agenda, largely embodied in the aims and targets of the Millennium Declaration. The lesson of interdependence embraces these important challenges too. UNESCO will make every effort to develop synergies between DESD and these other frameworks of national and international action.

Ultimately, the test of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development will be its capacity to foster educational change and improvement so that, in learning to live sustainably, we learn to live together in peace and in productive harmony with our environment. Education has a key role to play in addressing challenges like poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, gender inequality, health, conflict, and the violation of human rights. Education must help us to acquire the values, attitudes, capabilities and behaviours essential for meeting those challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have already come a long way since 20th December 2002, when the 57th Session of the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted Resolution 57/254 and declared the period 2005- 2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Since then, UNESCO has developed, through an intensive and extensive consultation process, a draft international implementation scheme, a presentation on which was made at the 59th Session of the United Nations General Assembly last Fall. We shall be presenting this scheme to the next session of our Executive Board in April, after which it will be formally issued. However, the IIS is a living document and will evolve as we move further along into the Decade.

Following this international launch, there will be a series of regional, sub-regional and national launches that will give the DESD partnership opportunities to stimulate public interest and mobilize action. Regional ESD strategies are being formulated, for example in the Europe-North America and Asia-Pacific Regions, and UNESCO has been an active partner in these processes. UNESCO is facilitating the development of regional strategies in the other regions and the processes are well under way.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In concluding my remarks, I would like to take this opportunity to publicly release the official logo of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which you can see behind me. A set of guidelines on the use of this logo are available.

Education for sustainable development, of course, must be more than just a logo or a slogan. It must be a concrete reality for all of us – individuals, organizations, governments - in all of our daily decisions and actions, so as to promise a sustainable planet and a safer world to our children, our grandchildren and their descendants. Here I would like to recall the words of the UN Secretary General, who said that “our

biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that sounds abstract - sustainable development - and turn it into a reality for all the world's people”.

The Decade provides us with the opportunity to work together - interdependently - so that we can learn to make a better world.

Thank you.