



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the Copenhagen Conference:
“Education for Intercultural Understanding
and Dialogue”**

Copenhagen, 21 October 2008

Madam Chair,
Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you for this discussion on education for intercultural understanding and dialogue. This theme is of utmost importance to all the organizations gathered here and in particular to UNESCO, whose mandate is founded on the conviction that education is one of the most powerful tools for eliminating ignorance and prejudice. The meeting also gives us an opportunity to discuss progress in implementing the commitments made three years ago in Rabat. That conference marked a decisive step forward towards time-bound, results oriented actions, to be implemented in the areas of education, the sciences, culture and communication.

I am delighted that we are holding our discussion here in the Kingdom of Denmark. It is testimony to the importance that the country attaches to dialogue and diversity

Allow me to begin by thanking the Danish Government, in particular Mr Per Stig Møller, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Danish Centre for Culture and Development, for so generously hosting us. Let me also take this opportunity to express UNESCO's appreciation of Denmark's steadfast support for our work – and in particular, our efforts to make Education for All a reality by 2015.

I am also delighted to welcome our partners from Rabat, ALECSO, ISESCO, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. UNESCO cherishes its longstanding and fruitful collaboration with each of you and looks forward to its continuation.

Let me say also how pleased I am to see the Council of Europe, which was an observer in Rabat further engaging with us as a co-sponsor of this meeting.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge with pleasure the entry of the Alliance of Civilizations, as a co-sponsoring organization. UNESCO and the Alliance are already cooperating in a number of areas, as reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that I signed with Mr Sampaio during the First Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in Madrid last January. I had the pleasure of explaining progress in implementing it at a meeting of Ministers of the Alliance's Group of Friends in New York last.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In today's rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world, people of different cultural and religious backgrounds naturally come into daily contact. Unfortunately, such encounters are not always embraced as enriching experiences. We see daily evidence of how ignorance and intolerance provide fertile ground for mistrust and conflict. Promoting dialogue is undoubtedly one of the most significant challenges of our times.

As the UN agency with a specific mandate in the fields of education and culture, UNESCO believes that education is a powerful vehicle for achieving international development goals and building peace. To realize this objective, we need to educate citizens of all countries to be open to other ways of thinking and being.

This conviction takes on particular resonance in 2008, as we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. I should like to quote article 26.2, which proclaims that:

“Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental

freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” (End of quotation)

This Conference’s focus on education is therefore extremely apt. Education can be a powerful vehicle for dialogue, helping to eliminate cultural stereotypes, build mutual understanding and respect, and strengthen social cohesion. Yet, for education to play this role, certain conditions must be in place.

First and foremost, curricula and teaching methods must be designed to enable learners to learn to live together in our increasingly multicultural societies. The Rabat Commitment therefore rightly placed curricula and pedagogical reform at the heart of efforts to strengthen education for intercultural dialogue.

Since 2005, there is important progress to report.

UNESCO, for its part, has placed particular emphasis on facilitating cooperation between European countries and Arab States in the revision of history and social studies textbooks. Experience shows that such collaboration not only ensures the more accurate representation of other cultures and beliefs, but can also provide a platform for discussing sensitive points of common history in an open and constructive way.

We shall have the opportunity to review these and other programmes over the coming two days. What is clear is that many good policies and practices now exist. The challenge will be to scale these up, and make sure they are adequately resourced.

Two further issues on our agenda are how to improve the teaching of religion and cultural diversity and enhance mobility and collaboration in higher education. These are both important topics for UNESCO, and we look forward to discussing with partners ways to strengthen the effectiveness of our common action.

By way of example, as follow-up to the Rabat Commitment, UNESCO has developed broad Guidelines on Intercultural Education and I hope that together we can identify practical ways to implement them.

We have also published, together with UNICEF and the Arigato Foundation, a tool kit for educators about how to teach respect for and understanding of different faiths and ethical beliefs.

These are good foundations, but I agree that further thought and research are needed on how to reorient education systems to better promote understanding of oneself, of others and of the world around us.

Allow me finally to mention that in Paris in July 2009 UNESCO will host the second World Conference on Higher Education. This major event will take up many of the issues you will address here, from the challenges of increasing student mobility to the implications of the globalization of higher education for cultural and linguistic diversity. We shall be following very carefully your debates on these subjects.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My focus thus far has been on formal education. But education for intercultural dialogue involves all sections of society and throughout life. That is why UNESCO works with a wide range of faith based and secular civil society organizations, including the media, as well as with governments and intergovernmental bodies to nurture the fundamental values of pluralism, peace, justice and human solidarity in its efforts to build a more just, inclusive and sustainable future.

Indeed, since our meeting in Rabat, UNESCO's Member States, through their Executive Board, have reaffirmed the complex and multi-dimensional character of this issue. They have unanimously requested me to develop innovative modalities of action, for the purpose of furthering mutual understanding and respect for all people's religious and cultural values, and for freedom of expression. Your discussions over the coming days will contribute towards their development.

In closing, let me underscore that education is at the heart of who we are and what we aspire to for our children. In our dreams of a world free from conflict, injustice and poverty, it is crucial that we turn our attention to how we instil the skills for dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding. We owe it to our children and to the future peace of our societies to make sure this happens.

Thank you for your attention.