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**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,**

on the occasion of International Youth Day

12 August 2018

This year, International Youth Day focuses on the theme: "Safe spaces for youth". Youth is a decisive phase in personal development. It is the age when people venture into the unknown, seeking new horizons; it is a time of encounters, often memorable ones; it is a time of first commitments. However, youth is also a vulnerable age, when negative experiences can quickly lead to withdrawal, isolation and marginalization.

Ensuring "safe spaces" for young people means creating the conditions for harmonious personal development, providing a climate of confidence in which they may freely express their potential and strengthen their self-esteem.

These spaces are, in a broad sense, all locations and all settings where young people interact with each other. First, they are places of learning and training such as schools, colleges and universities. They are also the meeting spaces dedicated to leisure and sports; public and political arenas, in which young people should be able to experience freely their citizenship; and urban spaces, which must provide a quality environment. Finally, they include digital virtual spaces and social networks, into which young people are drawn very early on and become particularly active.

Within all these spaces, it is necessary to ensure the principle of inclusion, beyond differences of gender, culture, language and religion, and to guarantee respect for freedom of expression and the dignity of each and every individual. It is essential to drive out discrimination, harassment and all forms of violence, whether overt or insidious, and help to prevent attempts at indoctrination.

With this in mind, UNESCO is launching the "spaces for youth" project this year. It is about creating networks, active at different geographical levels – local, national and regional – bringing together not only young people, but also political representatives,

researchers, entrepreneurs and opinion leaders. The aim is to involve youth in the design of programmes within UNESCO's mandate – in education, culture, science, communication and information – to include them in decision-making and make them key stakeholders in social and political life.

“Who can know the heart of youth but youth itself?” wrote Patti Smith in her novel *Just Kids*. On this International Day, I call on civil society stakeholders, policymakers and entrepreneurs to imagine new forms of collaboration that are able to harness the vast potential of youth and enable it to express all within it that is unique and promising.