



*(draft) Statement by Ferit HOXHA
Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Albania to Unesco
at the Plenary Debate of the 209th Session of the Executive Board*

3 July 2020

Mr. President,
Mr. President of the General Conference
Mme Director General,

We are back to an ordinary session of the Board but not a fully normal one. An unknown, dangerous and persistent pathogen brought the world almost to standstill, and we are still struggling to find the right balance in keeping hope, preserve life and project the future.

We would like to thank and congratulate the Director-General for the measures taken to navigate into these uncharted waters, ensure business continuity, implement programs and actions to reduce the crisis' impact, and raise the visibility of UNESCO.

Albania aligns with the statement to be delivered by the EU, so let me briefly highlight four main points:

First, one area, among many others, has been hit the hardest worldwide: that is education. The near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges around the globe has left scars, with far-reaching consequences. In this context, we consider the Global Coalition on Education a welcome effort to build partnerships during such a difficult period. We welcome and support the “back to school” campaign recently launched by the Organisation.

Deuxièmement, Le monde a toujours besoin de solidarité et de coopération, surtout en temps de crise. Il se porte rarement mieux que lorsque nous nous mettons ensemble. Nous l'avons tous constaté : la pandémie ne fait pas de distinction sur la nationalité ; elle défie les frontières ; elle ignore le niveau de développement. Il est donc clair que c'est par la coopération plutôt que la concurrence que nous pourrions traverser ces moments difficiles et de remodeler l'avenir.

Malgré des efforts, force est de constater que, pendant plusieurs mois, le monde a navigué à vue, sans vrai leadership, sans coordination, courant ainsi le risque de laisser se créer un vide inquiétant qui pourrait mettre davantage en danger le multilatéralisme, déjà sous pression. En ce qui nous concerne,

nous ne voyons guère de solution dans la division, encore moins dans les replis nationalistes qui trouvent toujours un terrain fertile en temps de crise.

Third, this crisis also showed how much our life has become more and more digital. The pandemic reminded us abruptly that reliable online access has become a daily necessity. We distanced physically for months, but we kept digitally close, being alone together.

Nowadays, we communicate and get entertained online; but we also get informed, we shop, we work, and, maybe, the unknowns of the future will make us switch to education online. This may be fascinating, but it is far less promising, if not outright frightening, when faced with the huge disparities, not only among countries but also within countries.

Therefore, access to technology is a powerful drive to well-being and development. It needs to be properly addressed with priority, through a human rights prism, so that it doesn't become a factor for continued divide, increased inequality, which could reverse reduction of poverty gains. It will then be harder to ensure that no one is left behind since far too many are and many more would be. We would be faced with poverty pandemic.

Fourth, human rights, information and freedom of expression constitute core values for democratic societies. Human rights cannot be simply nice words; they are only measured in concrete, hard deeds. Informed people are more empowered and make better decisions; informed societies are stronger, more productive and more resilient.

These were once more highlighted by the crisis, in the face of wide proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and fake news. We commended UNESCO for its genuine efforts in promoting accurate and reliable information. We, as well as the large public opinion, expect no less by an organisation like ours. We look forward to the World Press Freedom Conference, co-organised by Unesco and the Netherlands, to issue a strong message in favour of freedom of expression, reliable information, and the safety of journalists.

Mr President,

On November last year, it seems a world away, a terrible earthquake struck my country with devastating consequences.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our heartfelt gratitude to all those countries, in particular all the countries of our region and the European Union, for their sympathy and concrete assistance, which helped us save lives and assist those affected.

I would also like to thank Unesco and its Cultural Sector for the cooperation established in the aftermath of the earthquake through measures for intervention and conservation for the cultural heritage.

Let me conclude Mr. President by saying that, in only a few months, the world has changed profoundly with consequences that we are still unable to fully grasp.

While we gradually adapt to this new normal, we must ensure that we continue our work and that the organisation continues to discharge its responsibilities to the benefit of people and societies around the world who have placed high confidence in it and rightly so.

Thank you.