

Mr. Chairperson, Madam Director-General,
Mr. President of the General Conference,
Excellencies, Colleagues,

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a wide-reaching impact on almost all policy areas covered by UNESCO. The crisis is far from over: We are still in the midst of a global epidemic, assessing its consequences and gradually adapting our policies to the new situation.

Looking ahead to the coming months, I would like to highlight two areas where UNESCO's input is particularly relevant. The first relates to education, and the second to the potential impact of the Covid pandemic on our societies, democracy and the rule of law.

In the field of education, governments are pursuing a variety of approaches to mitigate the school closures that have left over a billion students out of school. This is a challenging task, since most countries are simultaneously undergoing major economic contractions.

While the pandemic has given a push to explore new ways of teaching and learning, the connectivity gap and the lack of distance learning capacity increase exclusion and inequality. Some groups, such as girls and people with disabilities in developing countries, are especially vulnerable. The recent UNESCO GEM report shows that 40% of the poorest countries have not provided specific support to disadvantaged learners during the crisis.

To avoid a substantial setback in reaching the SDG 4, and a negative effect on gender equality, we therefore need swift action.

A second area of concern is the impact of the Covid crisis on the openness of our societies, on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As stated recently by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, some measures that countries have adopted in response to the crisis have led to undue or excessive restrictions in the areas of freedom of expression and access to information.

In our view, the pandemic has demonstrated the essential role of free, independent and pluralistic media as a means to enhance transparency, accountability and trust in government in times of crisis. It has also shown how important it is to promote access to reliable information, including open access to scientific information. Access to reliable information is not a luxury, but it is critical if we want to overcome the longer-term challenges created by the crisis.

With this in mind, we expect UNESCO to uphold its important mandate in the field of communication and information, and to adopt an increasingly active role with respect to human rights and freedom of expression.

Dear Colleagues,

This Executive Board session will pave the way for the next Medium-Term Strategy. That strategy must be focused on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. And to reach that aim, we need close collaboration across different sectors, with other organizations, civil society and the private sector.

One key question will be the sustainability of the field network. The current overly complex global network is inefficient and hampers UNESCO's capacity to make an impact.

As a longstanding partner of UNESCO, together with the other Nordic countries, Finland welcomes the efforts to consistently strengthen UNESCO's resource mobilization and partnership strategies. We continue to support the strategic transformation process, as a way to increase UNESCO's operational efficiency and effectiveness. These goals are all the more important in the context of the Covid crisis.

Finally, a few words on the Executive Board itself. We support and welcome the consensus concerning the working methods of virtual meetings. These recommendations, which were reached after thorough discussions, will allow the Board to remain operational also during times of crisis.

Finland aligns itself with the EU statement.

We look forward to fruitful discussions during this session.

Thank you.