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General policy debate

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Statement by Deputy State Secretary Krystyna Marty

Madam President of the General Conference

Director-General Irina Bokova reminded us just recently that UNESCO has been the birthplace of many ideas. Isn't that the organisation's true value? UNESCO was created to come up with solutions. It is certainly the best instrument available to bring together knowledge and develop pioneering concepts and innovative policies. Its educational, academic and cultural networks and links to civil society, together with the National Commissions for UNESCO, are the organisation's greatest assets. Their contributions deserve greater recognition in order to help achieve the 2030 Agenda and to strengthen our societies' resilience in the face of current challenges.

It is thanks to their support that our organisation is able realise its full potential in the field of science diplomacy. Strengthening ties between research, policy and society is crucial for achieving the goals of sustainable development. Switzerland commends and supports the important contribution of the natural sciences to sustainable development. I would like to mention in particular the UNESCO Chairs conference held in Geneva last July and also the shared aquifer resources management projects funded under the International Hydrological Programme.

Madam Chair,

Switzerland welcomes the progress made in the management of the Memory of the World programme. Building the future requires the courage to face the past. Many countries have taken this step. As a leading and innovative actor at the international level in efforts to deal with the past and prevent atrocities, Switzerland is determined to mobilise, together with UNESCO, member states to collect and preserve archives.

Let me mention in this regard that Switzerland has taken steps of its own to temporarily house threatened cultural property. We are offering this support to UNESCO to help preserve cultural property threatened by conflicts, emergency situations and natural disasters. In this regard, we support the decision to expand the scope of the strategy for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in armed conflicts to cover natural disasters.

Director-General Bokova and her designated successor, Audrey Azoulay, who was France's minister of culture at the time, played a remarkable role in ensuring the inclusion of the protection of cultural property on the Security Council's agenda. We are working towards the same goal in the Human Rights Council. Strengthening prevention and ensuring that societies can recover in post-conflict situations calls for coordinated action that takes culture into account. Switzerland is currently developing a comprehensive strategy to contribute to these efforts.

Madam Chair,

UNESCO must play a key role in setting standards that guarantee freedom of expression, including on the internet. It is also our view that UNESCO has a mandate to enhance the capacity of governments, the judiciary and civil society to combat impunity for crimes committed against journalists, cultural rights defenders, academics and teachers. Switzerland also considers that all UNESCO Chairs should help ensure that refugee scientists are given asylum.

Political models built on fear of sharing knowledge and a culture of ignorance belong to another era. This is the challenge of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, for which UNESCO has been designated as lead agency.

The report to be presented at the high-level political forum in New York in 2019 will address this SDG. Beyond particular contexts, we must jointly focus our attention on the quality of education systems, ensure the inclusive participation of institutions as well as their impartiality, and promote vocational education and training. These are the aims of Switzerland's new strategy for cooperation in education, which provides for increased support for UNESCO through the International Institute for Educational Planning.

The work carried out by UNESCO to combat violent extremism through education, to raise public awareness and promote 'learning to live together' is also essential. UNESCO should in our opinion completely overhaul its work, which is currently too dispersed, and focus on education proper.

The new spirit of humanism that the director-general has brought to UNESCO and through UNESCO does her credit. It has inspired millions of people. We thank her for it. To her designated successor, Audrey Azoulay, I would like to convey the confidence of the Swiss authorities. My country's only aim is to take an active part in a UNESCO that continues to find solutions and generate ideas to support the universal values of humanity and peace that must bring us together. This is the reason for Switzerland's candidature to UNESCO's Executive Board in 2019. We intend to fulfil this responsibility on the basis of solidarity and dialogue with all member states.

We regret, as do many others, the United States' and Israel's declared intention to leave UNESCO, as well as the unilateral conditions attached by some countries to the payment of their contributions. Switzerland will support the new director-general's efforts to ensure that UNESCO regains universal membership and unconditional support from its member states.

Thank you.

Délégation permanente de la Suisse auprès de l'UNESCO
Permanent Delegation of Switzerland to UNESCO

1, rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15
Tel. +33 (0)1 45 68 33 96, fax +33 (0)1 43 06 21 39
