



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

## **39th session of General Conference of UNESCO**

Address by

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of UNESCO

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### **Opening**

Mr Chairman of the Executive Board of UNESCO

Madam Director-General,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

I am immersed in a mixed brew of emotions as I take this opportunity to address the General Conference for the very last time, that is as President.

I must confess that time flies! It has been a great honour and privilege for me, my country Namibia, in particular, to have been accorded the opportunity of being at the helm of the supreme governing body of our Organisation for the past two years.

I once again thank UNESCO Members States, the Africa Group in particular, for the confidence shown in entrusting Namibia with this onerous responsibility. In the same vein, I would like to thank my Government for the privilege accorded to me to represent the Land of the Brave in this capacity.

Two years ago when I ascended to this position, I thought I knew all about UNESCO. Well, I must concede that I was wrong, because two years later, I have emerged from this assignment greatly enriched, much enlightened, indeed more wiser on the mechanics of the Organisation than before. This shows the primacy of lifelong learning!

At the onset of my tenure, I had a burning desire, and still do, in concert with my colleague, the Chairman of the Executive Board, acting in tandem with the Director-General, to engineer the financial revival of our Organisation. I must however acknowledge, that our success largely depended on the desire and goodwill of Member States to rekindle and or sustain their appetite, to without fail, honour their obligations to the Organisation. It is regrettable that, as our tenures are drawing to a close, for me, this afternoon and for the latter two next month, we still have to reiterate our calls to the concerned Member States to honour their dues while their collective burden now invariably has to be passed on to the next wave of leaders of our Organisation.

UNESCO's capacity to maintain its vintage leadership position in driving the SDG agenda in areas within its mandate, is severely threatened by its perpetual weakened financial position. As I stated in my address during the 200<sup>th</sup> session of the Executive

Board, as an Organisation whose mandate is central to the advancement of humanity, UNESCO should mend its punctured resource base to avoid becoming a historical entity immersed in a sea of opportunities, yet running the risk of contaminating its mandate. I stated then and still do so now, that we cannot and must not rely on the benevolence of extrabudgetary contributions to execute our basket of programs. Our Organisation has no doubt exhausted the much needed fiscal space to manoeuvre its programs. I appeal to Member States to peel off this impregnable – this impermeable layer of indifference we seem to have adopted for our actions are perilously close to compromising our relevance! We must snap out of the current comatose of denial and forthwith restore the financial viability and predictability of this great Organisation.

Your Excellencies,

During the past two years, I criss-crossed vast oceans, deserts and plains, interacting with several Member States from mother Africa to Asia, Latin America to the Caribbean, the Arab Region and of course Europe. I had the rare opportunity to visit and interact with our Organisations' frontline staff – the staff in the Field Offices, the everyday protagonists of our decisions taken from Headquarters. I was struck by their enthusiasm and absolute dedication to work, this in spite of the overly challenging environments they operated. Field Offices are the theatres of our Organisation's program execution. Therefore, UNESCO's continued credibility and relevance to Member States, hinges on their unconstrained capacity to deliver. Presence and presence alone is not sufficient. Functionality and proven ability to lead,

support Member States and deliver the approved program of activities, is paramount!

Equally, I was deeply touched, almost reduced to tears, to witness first-hand the unshaken faith Members States continue to place in UNESCO as a dependable partner, as a partner of choice in driving their respective nations' agenda in the areas of Education, Culture, the Sciences, and Communication and Information. The unbridled confidence Member States have in UNESCO, is premised on the visible global leadership in areas within its mandate the Organisation has provided and continues to provide; is based on the valuable expertise the Organisation has provided and continues to provide; and is certainly grounded on tangible outcomes its programs and interventions have yielded and continues to yield. We should therefore tirelessly work to mend any fissures that may emerge in our operations so as to consolidate the faith the global community has in the quality of our leadership and sanctity of our work.

Your Excellencies,

Given escalating incidents of intolerance, rising global tensions and a creeping chorus for violence as opposed to peaceful settlement of disputes, UNESCO's enduring mandate of building peace in the minds of women and men, has never been more relevant! The recent observation made by the United Nations' Secretary General, Mr António Guterres in addressing the General Assembly last September that "*we must not sleepwalk into war*", illustrates the urgency for heightened renewal of the values of peace, tolerance and mutual co-existence. It should however be

stated, that we cannot be effective advocates of peace nor can we expect to reap the maximum dividends of peace, when we continue to be an organisation beset with simmering disharmony! We must restore trust and must instil harmony amongst Member States.

Today more than ever, we need a united organisation, one whose entire ecosystem, is geared towards the delivery of credible and quality outcomes.

Our weighty responsibilities amongst others to address escalating incidents of violent extremism, reduce the stubborn illiteracy rate particularly amongst girls and women, drive efforts to address climate change which threatens the continued existence of many of our Member States, curtail incidents of destruction and piracy of cultural heritage, address the elusive safety of journalists, compels us to act resolutely and in so doing affirm the universality of our actions.

In this era where there seem to be an onslaught on multilateralism, UNESCO needs to show its pedigree of resilience and wither the current storm, as was the case before when faced similar challenges. This we can only achieve, if those of us who eternally subscribe to the supremacy of our mandate, those of us who believe in the centrality of interdependence and mutual co-existence, close ranks and forge ahead in unison. Giving up on the sacred responsibility of advancing the well-being of humanity, is not an option at all!

Excellencies,

I must acknowledge the General Conference's foresightedness in having established the Working Group to examine the governance, procedures and working methods of our Organisation's Governance organs. Although, this was a mammoth undertaking, its inclusiveness yielded immense value in building greater cohesion among Member States. Coming at a time when our Organisation has assumed greater responsibilities in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, recommendations advanced, if accepted, will go a long way in creating a robust governance regime. As an organic institution, UNESCO cannot barricade itself in traditional governance practices when the dynamism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires the Organisation to change! Given the hesitation, that usually accompanies any change, I am inspired, and I trust that you too will, by the words of Allan Watts who once said: "*The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.*"

I therefore hope and trust that the desire expressed by a substantive number of Member States to initiate reforms in key areas of the Organisation, though not having mustered the desired consensus, will not be drowned during the choreography of your discussions. I encourage Member States to approach the debate with open minds and willingness to engage with the core issues, rather than religiously adhere to initial positions. The resolution of these issues is fundamentally critical to attain the imperatives of inclusiveness and equity and for asserting the centrality of the General Conference.

Excellencies,

I have chaired the Working Group on the Governance, Working Methods and Procedures of the Organization, which was established by the General Conference with a mandate of two years, 2016 and 2017.

In addition to the recommendations of the Working Group, I also wished to ventilate the debates of Member States with contributions that are based on my own consultations at Headquarters and in the Field, and also, based on my listening to debates held informally within this Organization.

I have taken the decision to break away from the conventions of our Organization and provide the General Conference with a full report, in Document 39 C/INF.23, reflecting the five key questions that, in my opinion, have emerged as being central in the review of the governance architecture of the Organization:

1. Is the current interpretation of UNESCO's mandate still relevant? Or are we following on this mandate in terms of five Major Programmes as a ritual?
2. Should UNESCO operate along the same functions across all its Major Programmes? Notably regarding normative action and capacity building.
3. Is UNESCO a political as well as a technical agency? And here, I am suggesting several proposals to safeguard the debates on the Programme of the Organization, as, on several occasions,

the Programme was the casualty of the politicisation of our debates.

4. How to provide UNESCO with the means to achieve its ambitions? It is indeed key to enhance the delivery capacity of the Organization.
5. Looking at UNESCO from the field, shouldn't we need a new Partnerships Compact with our traditional but also new partners?

In my report, I implore Member States to reaffirm their political will and to provide a safe haven for the Programme. We need to insulate politicised debates that are more related to the international relations remit than the technical fields of expertise of UNESCO – as well as those debates that lead some Member States to condition their contributions to the Regular Budget of the Organization for political reasons. I also believe that the issue of reengineering UNESCO's capacities to favour results over a culture of control will also be critical. The impact of UNESCO is about its visibility and results on the ground. It is thus critical to promote the role of UNESCO's Field Offices, but also our contributions as Member States to the implementation of UNESCO's Programme, notably by reinforcing the technical inputs of the National Commissions for UNESCO.

In concluding, let me express my sincere unreserved thanks to a host of individuals with whom I had the pleasure of working.



First, to Ambassador Michael Worbs, the Chairman of the Executive Board, for his steadfast leadership of the Board during very turbulent times. Your valuable inputs during our engagements as leaders of the three organs of this Organisation, assisted in shaping our direction on key issues. Since your term will also be ending soon, I wish you the best in your future endeavours.

To Madam Director-General, what else can I say that I have not said before? You, Madam Director-General have led our Organisation with distinction for the past eight years. You have over the years asserted and curved UNESCO's leadership role in key areas of its mandate. You have cemented its global relevance, notably within the United Nations System. Notwithstanding many trials and tribulations we have gone through, you consistently displayed resilience in your leadership and kept our Organisation afloat and focussed on program delivery. As you are about to conclude your tour of duty, I wish you and your family God's blessings. You can certainly hold your head high for you did what was humanely possible in your stewardship of our Organisation. That which you could not accomplish, let the incoming wave of leadership take up, for no mortal human being can ever, shall ever fully accomplish the aspirations of an Organisation with such an eternal mandate. My last parting counsel to you is "please spend quality time with your family" who may not have had sufficient time to be with you over the years, when you had to "juggle" your official engagements!

To the staff, the colleagues who made it possible for me to dispense my mandate – Colleagues in GBS - the Secretariat of the Governing Bodies- under the able leadership of both Mr Jacques Rao who has since retired, and now Ms Karima Bekri-Lisner. You, colleagues Mr Luis Salamanques and Ms Anna Bonetti – a big thank you for the dedication and professionalism with which you rendered the necessary services. You were my reliable sounding boards on procedural and many other issues which were critical in ensuring constructive discussions not only during the General Conference, but also in the Working Group. You are a small unit with a big task. Yet you have risen to your task by building a committed, talented and multi-tasked team, whose obsession with quality outcomes, I proudly share!

To the colleagues who were members of the President's inner cycle, Ms Catherine Thiounn, now retired, Ms Eunice Ong, and Mr Ahmed Abdelli, and last but not least, Ms Dorine Dubois. I do not have words to express my gratitude to you all, for your valuable insights and assistance offered. You were my close confidantes! You were indeed my surrogate family members during my lengthy stay in Paris. Whatever good deeds, if any, UNESCO will derive from my tenure as President- you colleagues played a big part. Ms Dubois, your knowledge of UNESCO from the programme to central services function, your attention to detail, your rigour kept me focused and added elegance to our work; Ms Ong, your sharp organisational and coordinating skills kept our programs lean yet very rich in content, and Mr Abdelli, your intricate knowledge of your job, kept "this soldier" safe and ensured that we carried out our engagements safely and on time – never late!

Finally, let me conclude with a picture. As you can see, this was taken by Clemens Friedrich, somewhere in this world, in one of the countries on mother Africa – in southern Africa – in Namibia in particular- at a private game lodge called Erindi. When Clemens posted this photo on his twitter account, one of the comments was “if human beings learnt to live like these two ancient animals, earth would be paradise”. Very true! The picture also resonates with what Aristotle argued 2000 years ago that an individual was “born to live in complex organisation with his/her fellow creatures, in community and in harmony, through compromise, but united through a common purpose, which is to live a shared life”. But what I wanted to leave with you for what it is worth is the following: **UNESCO Member States come in different shapes and sizes, they come with different orientations – but are intricately enjoined by the sanctity of the enduring mandate and values of the Organisation. Therefore, let us create space in the UNESCO commonage for all those who wish to join the crusade to advance the well-being of humanity.**

***Spasibo, Gracias, Xiè Xiè, Shukraan, Merci, Thank you!***

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