

President of the General Conference,

Chairperson of the Executive Board,

Madam Director General,

Your Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, let me extend our heartfelt appreciation to Madam Irina Bokova, the outgoing DG, for the great services rendered to the organization and for her commendable leadership during her tenure. I wish to also extend our warmest felicitations to Madam Audrey Azoulay, the nominee elected by the Executive Board as the next Director General of UNESCO. We look forward to your election as the next DG by the General Conference and Sri Lanka would like to express our fullest cooperation to you. The Government of Sri Lanka also wishes to thank UNESCO for extending timely assistance to restore schools affected by severe floods in 2016 and 2017.

In a world embittered by war and devastated by frequent natural disasters, the values advocated by UNESCO are essential. The need for lasting peace and sustainable development is globally felt stronger than ever. Population continues to grow while resources diminish. Hence, it is essential that we resort to sustainable consumption patterns and introduce alternatives for non-renewable natural

resources. This is where Education, Traditional Knowledge, Science, Technology and Innovation, and Communication are required to operate in unison to collectively achieve SDG targets.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Government of Sri Lanka has placed highest priority on achieving Sustainable Development Goals. The Sustainable Development Act was passed in the Parliament to facilitate the legal framework for developing and implementing a National Policy and Strategy on Sustainable Development. The main objectives of this initiative are to promote integration of environmental, economic and social factors in the decision making process of the government and to formulate implementation strategies. Extensive stakeholder consultations are currently underway to prepare the National Action Plan for Sustainable Development.

“Sri Lanka Next: A Blue Green Era” is a comprehensive programme to protect environment and fight desertification and climate change. Being an island nation, we fully endorse the Decade on Ocean Sciences proposed by UNESCO. On the other hand, Sri Lanka has declared 2017 as the Year for Alleviating Poverty. A special national programme has been launched to strengthen village economy and improve livelihoods of villagers in a sustainable manner. The underline strategy is to enhance capacity of the grass-root levels while improving infrastructure and connectivity. HE the President

has appointed a Task Force on SDGs which he personally reviews regularly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have recognized education as the primary vehicle for reaching SDG targets. Provision of universal free education for 13 years has been strengthened by gradually introducing educational reforms and creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning. We expect to improve accessibility to educational material through utilizing Information Communication Technology and open education resources. This initiative helps to ensure un-interrupted education during conflicts or disaster situations. UNESCO is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Education to prepare the National Policy on ICT in Education and the related Road Map.

Recognizing the importance of maintenance of quality of education, the government has decided to invest heavily on training and continuous professional development of teachers and educational personnel. UNESCO Category 2 Centre established in Sri Lanka serves as a focal institute in this endeavour. We are regularizing teacher deployment and transfer processes and implementing the “nearest is the best school programme” in order to ensure equity and inclusiveness in education delivery. We expect to establish a

comprehensive Education Information Management System with the technical assistance of UNESCO while introduction of school boards and inspectorates which will serve to strengthen the management of general education system.

Mr. President,

Our Government has taken protection of children from all possible dangers very seriously. We introduced an insurance scheme to cover all school going children of Sri Lanka, irrespective of whether they are in Government, Private or International schools. Beneficiary families do not have to incur any expenditure on this comprehensive insurance coverage which provides protection to children 24 hours a day. In addition, we have initiated a broad national programme to protect children through extensive awareness creation and strengthening legal and institutional structures. Our environmental and health sectors have undertaken extensive programmes to reduce untimely death of productive citizens through non-communicable diseases and road accidents.

I am pleased to inform this august assembly that the Government of Sri Lanka has taken steps to eliminate discrimination against women in all forms. Women's participation in general and higher education surpasses that of men. However, there is a marked lesser visibility of women in governing and managerial positions. In an endeavor to

strengthen the participation of women in different tiers of the Government, an amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka was recently passed.

Your Excellences,

Being a country rich in tangible and intangible heritage, we have placed high significance on protection and promotion of our heritage. While updating site and monument registries and national inventories, we are exploring the assistance of information technology in updating databases, creating public awareness and education. Special emphasis is given to protect and support practitioners of various intangible cultural heritage elements and motivating younger generations to continue the traditions.

Sri Lanka is a country that emphasizes social protection and social empowerment and welfare. We implement several programmes targeting under-privileged and vulnerable groups.

I am proud to inform you that the Right to Information Act is in operation in my country. It has many salient features to ensure accountability and transparency of the government machinery. While conducting numerous awareness programmes on the Act, the Government of Sri Lanka has taken several measures to ensure rights of journalists and their protection. We were happy to accept UNESCO's proposal to organize the main commemoration of the 2017

International Day to End Impunity against Journalists and Regional Seminar in Colombo.

Furthermore, the Government is taking commendable efforts to restore law and order within the country, create a peaceful and harmonious society and strengthen democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like conclude with the earnest hope that our collective efforts following UNESCO ideals would make the planet a better place for our future generations. Sri Lanka pledges its fullest cooperation to the efforts of UNESCO to realize the noble objective of building peace in the minds of men and women.

I look forward to a very successful session of the UNESCO General Conference in the coming days.

May the noble Triple Gem bless you all!