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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of *World AIDS Day***

1 December 2014

With one year remaining before the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals, we must review the significant progress made in responding to HIV and AIDS and consider the challenges that lie ahead to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030.

As one of six founding cosponsors of UNAIDS, UNESCO has been working for over two decades to support countries in strengthening the education sector response to HIV and AIDS, to provide young people with gender-sensitive, age-appropriate education about their sexual and reproductive health.

Both the epidemic and response have evolved considerably over this time. Today, with the expansion of treatment and prevention, AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 35 percent since 2005 and by 19 percent in the past three years. We have been able to sharpen the focus of our action – to do more than keep children affected by HIV in school, to realise their right to the education they need to make informed, accurate decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

The global AIDS response is having a significant impact, because it is evidence-based and it targets the needs of those most-at-risk. This has had a transformative effect on the way that countries have responded to such issues as discrimination and violence, based on sexual orientation and gender identity -- behaviours resulting in higher risk and vulnerability to HIV are also now discussed more openly and recognized as barriers to both public health and human rights.

This is a key lesson of the global AIDS response, as well as one of the most challenging to implement -- for HIV and other health issues. As Dr David Nabarro, the *United Nations System Senior Coordinator for the Ebola Virus Disease*, said before the UNESCO Executive Board in October 2014, a key challenge to containing the current Ebola outbreak has been to “get the message right” and “avoid communities being stigmatized and excluded.” The Ebola outbreak has shown the importance of providing clear and scientifically accurate messages to counter stigma and discrimination against those most affected – this must be a core component of any infectious disease response.

Despite progress and lessons learned, the Millennium Development Goal to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases remains unfinished business, and our ability to reach the new goal of ending AIDS by 2030 will be determined in part by our ability to overcome the stigma and discrimination that prevents us from reaching those left behind. Adolescents (age 10-19), especially those most vulnerable to HIV infection, still face barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health education and services. Globally, 15 percent of all women living with HIV are young women between 15 and 24 years old -- 80 percent of them live in sub-Saharan Africa.

We can take considerable pride in the progress achieved across the world in response to AIDS, and this gives us encouragement to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. However, caution is required along with confidence -- if the HIV epidemic can end within a generation, it can also resurge within a generation, if we fail to keep up and expand the actions proven to get ahead of it.

Irina Bokova