

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of the first Intergovernmental Meeting of Experts on the
Preliminary Draft Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Mr President of the General Conference,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you this morning, to open a meeting which is breaking new ground for UNESCO in regard to the protection of the world heritage through standard-setting action.

In accordance with the mandate conferred upon me by the General Conference at its 31st session and by the Executive Board at its 164th session, this first intergovernmental meeting of experts affords all of UNESCO's Member States, observers and partners an opportunity to consider in depth over a five-day period the preliminary draft of an international convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. I wish you all welcome.

If I may, I should particularly like to acknowledge the presence of the delegation of the United States of America, whose imminent return to UNESCO was announced from the United Nations by President Bush on 12 September 2002. I am looking forward to working more closely with the United States pending its accession in the near future as a fully-fledged member of the Organization. I should point out that our meeting today is the continuation of an idea launched in 1999 in Washington, at an international meeting organized together with the Smithsonian Institution to assess the UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989.

I also extend a particularly warm welcome to the representatives of international agencies, especially the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), with which UNESCO is pleased to be working closely in the process of drawing up an international convention.

Lastly, I should like to express my sincere thanks to the delegation of Japan whose generous contribution has enabled the meeting to be organized in the best possible fashion, and to the delegation of Spain which has once again made it possible for all the Spanish-speaking participants to take the floor in Spanish.

As you all know, UNESCO is best known for its work to protect the "tangible" cultural heritage. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, as the processes of globalization become more marked, rendering cultural diversity – which is so important to humanity – more fragile, that we need a more holistic approach to the expressions of our cultures, we need to ensure that they are no longer perceived in isolation but in the context of their relations with their physical – cultural and natural – and non-physical environment. We must also acknowledge that the intangible heritage, including as it does all of the practices and representations, spaces and forms of expression testifying to the creativity of human societies, plays a key role in the construction of identities, cultures and constructs and, hence, in progress towards genuinely sustainable development. In many parts of the world, and in particular in developing countries, it is the principal expression of cultural diversity.

The Washington meeting I referred to a moment ago demonstrated that the 1989 Recommendation, which was indeed intended to protect the intangible heritage, had not managed to achieve its goal. Its non-binding nature ("soft law"), offering little encouragement for States, was probably the main reason for that. Nevertheless, the feeling that preservation of the intangible heritage is both timely and necessary has continued to grow, even if a specific strategy has not been defined at the international level.

Being aware of this gap, and responding to a sense of urgency which I shared with many Member States, I decided to give particular priority to an initiative entitled the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Inspired by the Washington meeting and by the Turin meeting in March 2001, the first proclamation, of 19 masterpieces, was made in May 2001 and was immensely successful. Another meeting, in Elche, Spain, in September 2001, clarified the difficult issues of criteria that we encountered in connection with the first proclamation.

Protection of the intangible heritage has gradually been transformed from a cultural demand into a prescriptive requirement.

By 31 C/Resolution 30, the General Conference at its 31st session decided that the question should be regulated by means of an international convention. It therefore invited me to submit to it at its 32nd session “a report on the situation calling for standard-setting and on the possible scope of such standard-setting, together with a preliminary draft international convention”. Also at the 31st session of the General Conference, the Chairperson of Commission IV, in his oral report, gave us a pointer when he stated that “delegates also expressed strong support for the development of a new standard-setting instrument for the protection of the intangible cultural heritage, seen as a logical continuation of the 1972 Convention”, given the broad support obtained by the Convention.

In January 2002 I therefore convened an initial meeting of experts in Rio de Janeiro, to take the first step on the long road that would lead us to the preliminary draft of the convention. At a second meeting, which took place in March 2002 in Paris, a restricted drafting group, mostly composed of legal experts, embarked upon the drafting of an initial outline of the preliminary draft of the convention. I was thus able to submit to the Executive Board at its spring session an initial progress report, which led to very detailed and constructive debates. In 164 EX/Decision 3.5.2, the Executive Board then invited me to convene one or more intergovernmental meetings “to define the scope and to take forward the work on the preliminary draft of an international convention”. It was in the light of these discussions that the group of experts focusing more particularly on questions of terminology worked in June, laying the foundations for a definition and glossary of key terms in the field of the intangible heritage. This terminology was adopted straightaway by the drafting group, which met again and amended the text of its preliminary draft.

Your meeting thus inaugurates the next stage, in accordance with the decision of the Executive Board. As you will see, you will have to look at the outcome of several months of intensive, probing work on these complex issues.

I should like at this point to thank the experts for their generous participation in all these meetings, and in particular the Chairperson, Mr Bedjaoui, former President of the International Court of Justice and current President of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Algeria, who, despite his considerable responsibilities, has kindly agreed to place his skills in the service of an ideal that we share in order to chair the various meetings held since January. Without any doubt he has enabled us to make decisive progress in preparing the preliminary draft of the convention.

You are meeting today to discuss in depth the initial proposals that we are placing before you. The wide-ranging nature of the debates which we have witnessed throughout this year says much about the complexity of the question and its scope. And I have no doubt that, on many points, you will have different approaches; different ways of understanding and interpreting the very nature of the intangible heritage and the fields it covers, different concepts and legal systems in place, different national experiences in regard to public cultural policies. This diversity must not impede us, rather it should inspire our questions and initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a prelude to this meeting, 74 ministers of culture and 36 other State representatives met in Istanbul last week, under the auspices of UNESCO and at the invitation of the Turkish Government, to discuss the safeguarding of the intangible heritage in the light of its importance for cultural diversity.

At the close of the meeting they adopted a Declaration which places cultural diversity and the intangible cultural heritage which it mirrors on a genuinely political agenda by acknowledging the urgent need to act both nationally and internationally.

At the national level, this would mean developing policies which aim at the identification, safeguarding, promotion and transmission of the intangible cultural heritage through information and education so as to obtain its recognition within States.

With regard to international action, the ministers expressed their appreciation and support for the programme on the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity; they also called upon UNESCO to foster the development of new forms of international cooperation, for example by setting up mechanisms of recognition, inventories of best practices and the creation of networks, and by mobilizing resources, in particular through the establishment of a special fund. Furthermore, the ministers asked for special attention to be paid to countries and territories suffering from poverty, conflicts or crises, and extend assistance when deemed necessary.

Lastly, the ministers considered that, in the spirit of 31 C/Resolution 30 adopted by the General Conference, an appropriate international convention could be a positive step towards pursuing our goal. They declared that their governments were prepared to participate, in a spirit of constructive cooperation, in the debates of this meeting of experts.

In the light of the conclusions reached by the ministers in Istanbul, it seems to me to be essential to highlight the necessary interaction between national policies and international action, this interaction being both a stimulant and a catalyst.

Mr President of the General Conference,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are gathered here today, one week after the Istanbul meeting, “to define the scope and to take forward the work on the preliminary draft of an international convention”. We have prepared most carefully the proposals submitted to you for this preliminary draft. I hope that they will constitute a sound basis for your debate. The Istanbul Declaration should also provide you with a framework of reference, as it stresses the urgent need to find international solutions for the safeguarding of the intangible heritage, which is seriously threatened in the age of globalization.

The draft of the new convention cannot, I know, be finalized in just one week, even though I am convinced that you will now make major progress. Accordingly, further intergovernmental meetings of experts will be held in 2003 so that I will be in a position to propose to the General Conference at its 32nd session, in the form of a preliminary draft of an international convention, a set of universally acceptable principles and measures for the protection of the intangible cultural heritage.

I wish you all every success.