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Director General, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to speak at the 38th General Conference of UNESCO, and I appreciate the opportunity to address you as one of the key organisations in the United Nations family is about to celebrate its 70th anniversary.

UNESCO's role and mandate is as important today as it was 70 years ago. Education, science, culture, communication and information are all essential in a world where people are increasingly interconnected and dependent on each other. New generations are growing up as global citizens, sharing global responsibilities.

UNESCO was founded in the wake of a world war. Millions had perished; millions had been forced to flee from death and despair; millions had lost their homes, and left everything behind in search of a better future.

Today, the world is facing the largest refugee crisis ever since. 60 million people are fleeing from war and conflict. We share a joint responsibility to act: each and every one of us, as global citizens; each and every nation, as committed members of the United Nations.

We have a responsibility to provide protection and aid. We have a responsibility to promote peace, reconciliation and resilience, to try to prevent future crises of the magnitude we are now witnessing.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, as it was 70 years ago, UNESCO is in an excellent position to unite and strengthen our efforts.

Take global education and development:

More than 120 million children and young people are out of school. Lack of quality education and poor learning outcomes leave millions more without the opportunity to make a decent life for themselves and their future families.

Hardest hit are the many victims of war, natural disasters and epidemics. Increased efforts are needed to prevent military attacks on schools and universities. More support is necessary to ensure quality education in emergencies and protracted crises.

Education is a fundamental human right; it is also essential for ensuring inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. Quality education provides people with the skills, knowledge and values they need to tackle the various challenges they are likely to face in society.

I would like to mention here the ongoing work on developing a global convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications. In a world where an increasing number of people are on the move, everybody should be able to get their qualifications assessed and have the opportunity to contribute to the society in which they are living.

In my capacity as UNDP ambassador, I have seen how crucial quality education is for development: girls learn about health and sexuality, and avoid early pregnancies; the opportunities of marginalised groups, such as children with disabilities, are improved; children and adolescents can reach their potential; and societies are able to grow and prosper.

As the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Malala Yousafzai, puts it: ‘Education is one of the blessings of life – and one of its necessities.’

World leaders have recently adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Successful achievement of the goal on education – SDG 4 – is crucial to eradicate extreme poverty and to meet many of the targets of the new 2030 agenda.

I would like to congratulate and commend UNESCO for the leading role it has played in promoting access to quality education for all. The Framework for Action to be agreed on during this General Conference will certainly be a key reference point over the next 15 years.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Director-General Bokova for being one of the convenors of the International Commission on the Financing of Global Education Opportunities that was announced at the Oslo Summit on Education for Development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNESCO's role and mandate is as relevant today as it was 70 years ago. Education is one vital area of its work. Freedom of expression is another.

As the United Nations agency with a specific mandate to promote 'the free flow of ideas by word and image', UNESCO plays a key role in fostering free, independent and pluralistic media.

Essentially, this is about providing us with the information we all need as global citizens, enabling us to understand and make informed decisions in a world that is rapidly changing and becoming increasingly complex.

It is not in our interest to create new barriers between people. In a world that is ever more closely interconnected, the values of democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of the press are essential for promoting peace, building inclusive societies, and jointly addressing the challenges we face.

Just as important and timely are the efforts UNESCO is making to protect the world's material and immaterial cultural heritage, and promote our cultural diversity.

Director General, you have spoken out clearly on this issue. You have been instrumental in mobilizing the Security Council, governments, legal authorities, market operators, culture experts and not least young people against the senseless destruction of cultural heritage, and against the illicit trafficking and trade with cultural artefact. Through initiatives such as the #Unite4Heritage campaign, launched in Baghdad earlier this year, violent extremism and thefts will be defeated with both specific countermeasures and a joint universal message of tolerance and dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every human being has the right to lead a dignified life. This means that we all have the opportunity to fulfil our potential, which requires adequate health care, education, income and security. It means having the freedom to make the decisions governing our own lives, and to have this right respected by others. And it means having a common responsibility, to strengthen the dignity of others, and ultimately, our own.

This ties in well with UNESCO's mandate and the notion that peace can only be established on the basis of shared values and close and meaningful dialogue. And it ties in well with UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education; the idea that learners are empowered to become responsible global citizens by being equipped with values, knowledge and skills that are based on- and instil respect for human rights, social justice, diversity, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This conference coincides with one of the biggest humanitarian crises in recent history. I am confident that UNESCO is well placed to unify and strengthen our response, just as it was 70 years ago. I wish you every success over the next two weeks.

Thank you.