

President of the General Conference,

Chairperson of the Executive Board,

Madam Director General,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I wish to extend the warmest felicitation of my country to His/ Her Excellency, the newly elected President of the General Conference. Sri Lanka would like to express you our fullest cooperation.

I would also like to place on record our sincere appreciation to the outgoing President of the General Conference, His Excellency Hao Ping for his commendable leadership.

I take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to His Excellency Mohamed Sameh Amr, Chairperson of the Executive Board and his team for their excellent efforts during the past two years for the upliftment of the work of UNESCO.

Under the excellent stewardship of Madam Irina Bokova, UNESCO has managed to increase its visibility and contributed for the betterment and sustainability of our planet. At this moment, I wish to express our appreciation to Madam Director General.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A new era of democracy and good governance has dawned in Sri Lanka. Today, we are rebuilding our country which suffered the consequences of 30 years of conflict, as a single nation of multiple ethnicities. I am privileged to be given this chance to share some of our Policy Initiatives with you at the General Policy Debate of the 38th Session of the UNESCO General Conference.

HE the President, Hon. Prime Minister and the Government of Sri Lanka have given absolute priority to sensitive issues such as equitable, quality education for all, sustainable development, social cohesion and sustainable peace, and right to information.

Sri Lanka has provided universal free education at primary, secondary and University levels for the past six decades. These sustained efforts in education, health and other social infrastructure sectors have managed to bring about outstanding social development in Sri Lanka, securing the rank of 73 of the UNDP Human Development Report, ahead of other countries in the South Asian Region.

With the aim of making Sri Lanka a Knowledge Hub in the region, the Government has decided to increase the investment on education to 6% of its Gross Domestic Product in a phased manner within the next three years. The main focus areas of this enhanced investment will be the improvement of the education quality and service delivery.

Distinguished Delegates,

Sri Lanka will also reiterate the importance of education in promoting human rights, human development, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and aspiration of cultural diversity. We strive to ensure equitable and inclusive access to Quality learning for all-children, youth and adults at all levels of education, from early childhood care and education (ECCE) to tertiary education in both formal and non-formal settings.

Government is taking steps to set up a strong legal framework through New Education Reforms in assuring reduction of the barriers of education and improvement of the quality of education at all levels. Initiatives such as ECCE Policy, programme of development of thousand secondary schools, “nearest is the best school programme” and “sanitation first programme” are targeted to improve the access for quality Primary and Secondary education. Development of teacher education and school leadership, improvement of science, technology and ICT are also identified as priority areas.

Having considered the progress made by Sri Lanka in achieving the six Education for All (EFA) Goals, having examined the remaining challenges, and reflecting on future priorities and strategies for Sri Lanka to achieve the emerging post -2015 education agenda, we fully endorse the vision, principles and targets laid down in the overarching goal to ‘ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030’.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are fully aware of the global challenges of climate change and its consequences. Being an island nation, the impacts are felt severely by us than most other countries. Current leadership in Sri Lanka has placed highest significance on environment conservation and sustainable development. The Ministry of Environment has introduced a 3 year accelerated programme called “Punarudaya” (Revival) for environmental conservation and improvement of forest cover. Special directives have been issued to all relevant parties to internalize environmental concerns into all their development initiatives. Special emphasis has been given to prevention of degradation of forest and coastal areas, Central Highlands and other sensitive ecosystems such as urban wetlands and water bodies.

Your Excellencies,

Sri Lanka commends the UNESCO initiatives in protecting Cultural Heritage during conflict. It is our responsibility to protect and promote tangible and intangible heritage of our countries for the generations to come. We are in the process of strengthening and building capacities of the institutional setup for that purpose. The subject of History has been made compulsory at the secondary school level in my country to create awareness and appreciation about these valuable assets among younger generations.

Distinguished delegates,

The Government of Sri Lanka is implementing social protection and social safety-net programmes to ensure social empowerment and welfare. Our special focus is on under-privileged and vulnerable groups. These programmes do not confine to monetary assistance but include improved accessibility, capacity building through vocational training to provide equal opportunities to them.

It is my great pleasure to report that the Government of Sri Lanka is in the process of enacting a bill to ensure Right to Information. Introduction of Media Ethics and ensuring rights and protection are new initiatives of the new Government.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the importance of collective efforts to save this planet from all the current challenges it faces. 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 wish all the success to the endeavours of the 38th Session of the UNESCO General Conference.

May the noble Triple Gem bless you all!