

Statement of Mr. Illugi Gunnarsson, Minister of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland at the 38th General Conference of UNESCO:

Mr./ Ms. President of the General Conference

Mr./Ms. Chair of the Executive Board

Madame Director-General

Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to express our congratulations to you, Mr. President, on your election. We also wish to thank the outgoing President and the Chair of the Board.

Excellencies,

In today's international community, nations are engaged in never-ceasing competition where it takes a strong economy and a flourishing society to attract young and dynamic people. Quality education is a key ingredient in the development of any economy or society.

In that respect, the point of reference is not necessarily the length of schooling, but the competence individuals have acquired on leaving school and their ability to use it to improve their living standards and contribute to society.

There is no question in my mind that education is the key. The key to contributing to lasting peace, the key to contributing to sustainable development and the key to the eradication of poverty. It is my belief that education is a fundamental human right of which nobody should be deprived.

The world has changed enormously since the establishment of UNESCO 70 years ago. We live in a period of rapid technological development, globalisation and natural and societal change. Regardless of where we think the world is heading, most people agree that a good education is the best asset to bring on that journey. A solid education makes it easier for young people to find their way in a complex and ever-changing world, besides being the foundation of a strong economy and of the citizens' wellbeing.

Education and gender equality are two key elements in the new Sustainable Development Agenda. The balance reached in this universal and integrated 2030 Agenda is an achievement which we should be proud of. We are particularly proud to have been among the proponents of the of gender equality and empowerment of women as as overarching elements, necessary to achieving the other goals of our Agenda.

Our aims within UNESCO are also to spread knowledge and promote freedom of expression, global citizenship, enhance sustainable development, and to encourage acceptance of cultural diversity - just to mention some areas of great concern – these areas are all first and foremost addressed through better education.

We need to invest in this education and are pleased with the Framework Agenda in its commitment to equality and well-educated teachers.

One characteristic of a just and humane society is the treatment of its minorities. Iceland is deeply committed to continue its work with others against discrimination of any kind, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

Mr./Ms. President,

UNESCO has a unique mandate for safeguarding the freedom of expression and the media, which Iceland strongly supports. Not only is this a fundamental human right, which is vital for open societies, democracy and free market economies, but it is also as a key ingredient in realizing our ambitions in education, science and culture.

The potentials established by the new media need to be continued to be harnessed in the same spirit of freedom, so that they may best contribute to our goals.

This brings us to the importance of another important role of UNESCO for the promotion of linguistic diversity. Language is at the heart of cultural diversity, being one of the strongest components of cultural identity. It remains the most forceful vehicle of the world's intangible heritage.

In this regard our former President, Mrs. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, has been – and continues to be - an active participant in UNESCO's work, also in her capacities as Goodwill Ambassador for linguistic diversity and with the International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding - a UNESCO Category 2 institute in Reykjavík. We are convinced that the Institute will contribute in an important way to UNESCO's role and our common objectives in safeguarding linguistic heritage worldwide, and supporting linguistic diversity.

Ladies and gentlemen

To conclude, UNESCO's role as a champion of peace, understanding and tolerance is as ever urgent and vital. Education for all, gender equality and sustainability must be crosscutting themes in all our work. Iceland is firmly committed to playing an active role in contributing to UNESCO's role and thereby working towards the common good.

The universal nature of our new 2030 Agenda common goals requires each of our states to contribute – at the national, regional and global levels. None of us can succeed alone. Iceland is committed to playing its part in reaching these ambitious goals.

Thank you for your attention.