



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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вопросам образования,
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Address by Mr Hao Ping

**President of the 37th session of the General Conference,
on the occasion of the opening ceremony
of the 38th session of the General Conference**

UNESCO Headquarters, Paris
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Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

Good morning. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, as well as that of UNESCO. Seventy years ago, the heroes fighting fascism and giving their young lives for world peace awakened humanity's intuitive aspiration for peace and development. Seventy years ago, the insightful founders, hailing the victorious outcome of the Second World War and cherishing an epoch-making hope that the defences of peace would be constructed in the minds of men and women, created the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

In its 70-year history as an integral part of the United Nations system, UNESCO, through its efforts to popularize science and education, protect cultural heritage, promote dialogue among civilizations and preserve cultural diversity, has played a unique, important and irreplaceable role in maintaining and promoting world peace, global development and the intellectual progress of humanity. Allow me to take this momentous opportunity to pay my deepest and most respectful tribute to generations of people at UNESCO who have made significant contributions to the work of the Organization.

The resolutions adopted at the 37th session of the General Conference have been implemented under extremely difficult circumstances, through everyone's efforts, dedication and sacrifices.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

When I was elected President of the General Conference of UNESCO exactly at this moment two years ago, to applause and congratulations from you all, I made a solemn commitment that, working along with each and every one of you, I would live up to my new responsibility within this Organization with its long history. My memory of that moment is as fresh as ever.

Two years ago, the Organization had accomplished outstanding achievements. However, it must be admitted that it was faced with such major difficulties and crises that urgent reform was called for. Without reforms, the implementation of resolutions adopted by the General Conference would be compromised. We must develop new ideas and concepts to introduce reforms, new mechanisms and methodologies to guarantee them, and greater enthusiasm and more effective actions to realize them.

I remember vividly that, as the then Director of the Secretariat of the Governing Bodies showed me around the Secretariat offices on the very first day of my term of office, I was deeply touched to see the members of staff working passionately, selflessly and cheerfully.

In my two years in office as President, I have visited UNESCO field offices in China, Cambodia, Cuba, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Thailand and Tunisia. What impressed me the most was the moment when I met in Jordan with colleagues from the Iraq office who had just retreated from the battles in Iraq, risking their lives in the conflict taking place in the region. What I saw on their faces was dedication, hope, and faith.

I appreciate the wisdom of the Executive Board for the pivotal role it has played in restructuring the Organization's programmatic priorities, advancing reforms in the Secretariat, and ensuring the implementation of resolutions adopted by the General Conference.

I appreciate the generosity of Member States which have brought about a steady increase in extrabudgetary funding sources for the Organization. As the Chinese saying goes, "It is the firewood gathered by all that keeps the fire going in the hearth". Today I am very pleased to see the implementation of all the resolutions adopted at the 37th session of the General Conference. This, I must say, is the best acknowledgement of the concerted efforts made by the Secretariat, the Executive Board and the Member States, in spite of their differences, to successfully address internal and external challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, 2015, is bound to go down in history. At the world summit marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, the participants discussed general trends in the world and the shared responsibilities of the international community and formulated visions and plans for the future, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They reached a consensus that, at this critical moment in history, humanity is experiencing profound changes never seen in the last hundred years. For the generations to come, we must act now.

I recall that at the beginning of this century, people gathered with beautiful visions in Tonga, which is in the South Pacific and nearest to the International Date Line, to welcome the first ray of sunshine of the new millennium and to share that moment of happiness. In September of that year, 147 Heads of State and Government and other leaders gathered at United Nations Headquarters to reaffirm their shared respect for the Charter of the United Nations and to fully commit to the creation of a more peaceful, prosperous and just world by adopting the Millennium Development Goals.

Fifteen years have passed swiftly. Looking back at this period of history, we can rejoice at the steady progress in all fields; yet there are also concerns about various crises, challenges and instability for the future. Extreme poverty, gender inequality, insufficient access to education, youth unemployment, terrorism, religious conflicts, regional unrest, climate change, deterioration of the environment, communicable diseases and various humanitarian disasters: such challenges are increasingly threatening world peace and security and the prospect of stability and development for every country.

From the terrorist attack of 9/11 to the emergence of ISIS, from the Wall Street financial crisis to the development dilemma facing most countries, from political uncertainty prevailing in western Asia and North Africa following the Arab Spring to the heart-wrenching, massive numbers of Syrian refugees, our society is moving forward with difficulties and through violent oscillations, as if on a roller coaster.

In brief, we are probably in a relatively long period of change and reorganization. It is inevitable that there will be some oscillation and disorder and at a high price. New concepts and institutional innovations are badly needed for the development of human society. This is the issue that requires everyone's contribution of wisdom during this session of the General Conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Faced with profound changes in the international order and rapid increase in global challenges, UNESCO should act as it did when it chose to defend world peace at its creation 70 years ago: it should dare to make different choices and reaffirm those choices, and let people know that these choices will determine our future. As for us, we have every reason to believe that, building on our predecessors' efforts, we will make the twenty-first century more harmonious than ever.

To that end, I would like to make five suggestions:

First, we should cherish world peace and make it our top priority to uphold the institutional framework and values reflected in the Charter of the United Nations.

Following the Second World War, the international order was reconstructed around the Charter of the United Nations, which has played an important role in world peace and development during the past 70 years. Despite this long history, the values and conduct advocated by the Charter are still valid today; it remains the most important foundation of world peace for today and tomorrow.

The recent statement by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, about the Holocaust has earned the respect of all countries represented on that occasion, and my personal admiration. She said,

“We are responsible for the Holocaust. I see no reason to change our view of history in any way. We know that the responsibility for this crime against humanity is German and very much our own.”

I admire the Chancellor’s courageous choice to face history and shoulder that responsibility. I think this is the only way to lay down the burden, leave behind the pain and hatred of yesterday, and embrace peace with tolerance and an open mind.

Second, we should intensify our efforts to develop and promote the idea of the “community of common destiny” among the peoples of the world.

Today, we live in a world with different cultures, races, colours, religions and social systems. Countries are connected with, depend on, and influence one another more than ever, thus forming a community of common destiny.

Fostering and reinforcing awareness in different countries of this community of common destiny is in accordance with the trends of the world and the times we live in. This idea is an important theoretical foundation for the strengthening of cooperation and a collective response to challenges in a new age; it also shares the spirit of UNESCO’s purpose, “building peace in the minds of men and women”. To foster and reinforce awareness of the community of common destiny is an undeniable mission for the Organization in the future.

As the think-tank of the United Nations, UNESCO must take action. The Organization should further promote awareness of equality, mutual aid, mutual benefit and responsibility in different countries and among their people.

Third, we should contribute to the elimination of misunderstanding between different religions and civilizations, have more dialogue and seek a way to achieve harmonious coexistence among diverse civilizations in the twenty-first century.

All religions and civilizations share the same fundamental values, which constitute the theoretical foundation of the human community of common destiny. Stability and harmony in families and countries can be achieved only through mutual respect and equal treatment between people and countries. The Buddhist advocates the idea that “All are created equal.” A quote from the Bible goes: “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity [...] in the bond of peace.” And in the Koran the Prophet Muhammad states that those who love others as they love themselves are true believers.

As H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China, stressed during his visit to the Organization in 2014, “civilizations have come in different colours, and such diversity has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations relevant and valuable. Civilizations are equal, and such equality has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations possible. Civilizations are inclusive, and such inclusiveness has given exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations the needed drive to move forward.”

In spring 2015, together with the Director-General of UNESCO and the Chair of the UNESCO Executive Board, I paid a visit to the Holy See at the Pope’s invitation. Speaking of the religious antagonisms existing nowadays, His Holiness Pope Francis strongly recommended dialogue among different religions. The same peaceful wish is also shared by many of the countries I have visited in Europe, the Arab world, Asia, and Latin America.

The famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell noted in his article “Chinese and Western Civilization Contrasted” that history had repeatedly proven that the exchanges among civilizations provided the inexhaustible driving force for the progress of all humankind. The American writers and Pulitzer Prize winners Will and Ariel Durant also said in their masterpiece *The Lessons of History* that “civilization is the product of cooperation, and all people have contributed to it”.

One of our important tasks is to promote harmony, exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations as well as their common progress, and to bring into play the role of exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations in cementing friendship between all peoples, safeguarding world peace, and advancing human progress. We should draw upon the wisdom of all civilizations and seek for things that feed the heart and the mind so that people can work together in addressing the various challenges facing humanity.

Fourth, bearing in mind the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we should make education available to all, as part of our efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and serious imbalances in development and to address the global challenges brought about by such problems.

In 1999, when I was Vice-President of Peking University, I listened as the host to a speech given by the then President of South Africa Nelson Mandela. In his speech, Mr. Mandela said, “Our freedom will remain fragile and our rights empty shells if millions of South Africans continue to be cursed by the legacy of homelessness and hunger, ill-health and illiteracy.” That profound and thought-provoking speech remains fresh in my memory.

Hunger, poverty, ignorance, inequality and injustice are the root causes of fear and the soil that breeds all kinds of extremism. We need to make sure that such soil is shovelled away.

To that end, we should continue to put education first and promote equity in education to enable people to change their destinies. We should further increase assistance to developing countries, helping their governments and people develop educational, scientific and cultural programmes, particularly protecting the right to education for women, children and other vulnerable groups. We should help the young people of those countries develop necessary work skills and find job opportunities. By achieving equitable, open, comprehensive, and innovative development, we will lay a solid foundation for peace and prosperity in the twenty-first century.

Fifth, we should improve operational efficiency through institutional innovation and pool all available resources to improve the Organization’s professional competence in promoting exchanges among civilizations and to increase its influence in global governance.

The 70-year history of the Organization has shown amply that education, science and culture serve as crucial channels and bridges for exchanges among civilizations and that connectivity free from misunderstandings and institutional barriers is more stable and enduring. Going forward, the Organization should continue to act as a platform for multilateral exchanges and communication among countries in the fields of education, science and culture, offering dedicated services to its Member States. By adopting innovative mechanisms for cooperation and by enhancing its operational efficiency, the Organization will be able to expand into new areas and unlock the full potential of cooperation.

In the meantime, the Organization should become the spiritual home to the world’s most outstanding thinkers, scientists, educators, writers and artists. By pooling and leveraging their wisdom and insights, the Organization will be able to improve its professional competence in promoting exchanges among civilizations. It should also enhance its communications and collaboration with other United Nations agencies and Member States as well as NGOs and private entities so that resources can be channelled into addressing major issues confronting humanity.

Everyone should do something for UNESCO and each and every effort will be remembered by the Organization. Everyone should also be proud of having done something for UNESCO.

Lastly, please allow me to conclude by making a wish. The United Nations has a slogan of “A Stronger United Nations, a Better World”. UNESCO should be equally ambitious. Let us work together for “A Stronger UNESCO, a Better World”!