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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the first meeting
of the international Scientific Committee for the
UNESCO History Project

UNESCO, 30 June 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO today, on the occasion of the first meeting of the international Scientific Committee for the UNESCO History Project. I would like to begin by thanking the members of the Committee for agreeing to supervise the implementation of this important Project, which aims to inspire a new set of historical works on UNESCO's past orientations, activities and accomplishments. It is an honour to have the support of so many distinguished representatives of the historical profession.

UNESCO has always considered the historical sciences to have a key role to play in promoting international understanding and respect and, through this, in building peace and security. The Organization was founded in 1945 with the mandate to construct 'peace in the minds of men'. For our founding fathers, the Second World War was a cruel reminder that, without better understanding of the histories of the world's different cultures and societies, the danger of renewed conflict would always remain.

Issues of identity and memory are crucial to individuals and societies in post-conflict situations, or in countries in transition from authoritarian to democratic governance. However, reflections on the past – in particular the more painful parts of history – are also becoming increasingly important in public debates in more stable democratic societies.

One of the overarching aims of the UNESCO History Project is to encourage different perceptions of UNESCO's history and to stimulate reflection on how and why the Organization has interacted, over time, with such a variety of different players and partners. Any history of UNESCO will need to draw on diverse sources. It will also need to move beyond the institutional framework, and look at the multiple levels and forms of the Organization's work.

In November last year, UNESCO organized a history symposium to mark the beginning of its 60th anniversary celebrations. The symposium opened with a splendid and thought-provoking communication by Claude Lévi-Strauss, and concluded with some significant observations about the UNESCO History Project. The first observation was that research on UNESCO's history must adopt multiple approaches, and preferably include some form of oral history programme. Such research should, above all, adopt the perspective of the "periphery" rather than the "centre", focusing on external perceptions and experiences of the Organization. The second observation was that this historical work must be intellectually independent – it should not be an "official" history, and contributors should not be required to gain UNESCO's approval of their research. The third remark was that the History Project

should continue until 2010, and be managed by an international Scientific Committee.

These observations will provide the basis of our future work on the Project.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I take great pleasure in informing you that UNESCO has already launched an oral archives initiative. During the coming years, a significant number of former staff, and personalities closely associated with UNESCO activities, will be interviewed. This material will eventually be made available to scholars and others who work on the Organization's history.

I have also recently decided that as a general rule UNESCO's correspondence files should be available for research after 20 years, instead of 30 years as has been the case until now. This reflects my wish to open the archives for consultation as far as is possible, and to facilitate the work of researchers and the interested public.

It is my hope that within the next few years UNESCO will succeed in further developing its work in the historical sciences. As I have already said, our success here is integral to UNESCO's overall mission to promote greater inter-cultural exchange and dialogue. To quote the eloquent title of Roger-Pol Droit's recent intellectual history of the first sixty years of the Organization: history is about "Humanity in the Making". If the UNESCO History Project can contribute to this process – and help to educate humanity in the principles of tolerance, respect and understanding – then our efforts in pursuit of peace will be significantly advanced. We will not only be facilitating research on UNESCO's history, we will actually be making it.

Today, we have the opportunity to discuss the orientations of the History Project, and to establish a mechanism for the future work and decision-making of this Scientific Committee. I wish you all the best in your deliberations, and express my full confidence in the successful outcome of your meeting.

Thank you.