

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the interactive thematic session
on education for all and sustainable development in the LDCs

Brussels, 16 May 2001

Mr Secretary-General,
Distinguished Ministers,
Mr Chairperson,
Mr Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

It is a very special pleasure for me to be here among you today to open this thematic session organized by UNESCO on the theme “Education for all and sustainable development in the least developed countries”. I am deeply honoured that such eminent personalities have accepted my invitation. I am particularly gratified that Mr Kientega, Minister for Literacy and Basic Education of Burkina Faso, and Mr Mackenzie of USAID have agreed to co-chair the session. I am sure that this bodes well for our deliberations. Allow me also to welcome our colleagues from UNICEF and from the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie among us, and all the distinguished panellists, including the Minister of Education of Gambia.

The object of this session, which is to highlight the potential role of education in sustainable development, is very much to the point. For, of all the ways and means we may find, during this Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, of helping these countries to raise the living standards of their populations, there is one that is the key to many others, and that is education. In countries in which the main and sometimes only resource is human capital, we can readily appreciate how crucial it is to build up capacities through education, especially in rural areas, where the majority of the population lives. That was one of the main lessons we learned from the Dakar Forum, which validated the concept of quality formal and non-formal education as the key to any poverty eradication strategy.

You may argue that this is nothing new. I am not so sure. The global context at the dawning of this century is new. Poverty is gaining ground in most parts of the world, while growing wealth is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. Globalization, which places knowledge at the heart of the economic development and growth process, spells marginalization for most of the world’s population.

Education is no longer, therefore, just a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which every human being legitimately aspires for his or her personal fulfilment. It is the precondition for development of any kind, for the reduction of unemployment and poverty, for social and cultural progress, for the promotion of democratic values and for the establishment of lasting peace.

But there is more to it than that – it must be delivered with all the proper quality guarantees. For another thing that is new is our vision of education, which we now see in a broader perspective, largely as a result of the excellent work of the Commission chaired by Jacques Delors on Education for the Twenty-first Century. Education today is no longer confined to teaching the three Rs, or to apprenticeship for a particular trade, but is intended to help people to respond and adapt quickly to a constantly changing social, economic, technological and cultural environment, fostering in them attitudes and aptitudes – “learning

to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be” – while fully respecting their cultural identity, and this involves, in particular, teaching in local languages. It also means that it is a kind of education that is intended for all individuals, women and men, young people and adults alike, whether or not they have been enrolled in the conventional formal education system. Education is a process that should accompany people throughout their lives and provide them constantly with fresh opportunities for self-fulfilment and emancipation. Quality education is a powerful weapon with which to combat poverty – both because it equips children and young people with the abilities, skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that may help them to cope with the new pressures brought to bear on them, and also because it is the source of a better kind of development, which itself generates a higher standard of living.

And, lastly, what is also new is the development of collective awareness and the determined commitment of the international community as a whole to join in a global movement to further the cause of education for all, with specific objectives. Basic education for all is now high on the international poverty eradication agenda for, as was stated by the participants in the Dakar World Education Forum in April 2000, without accelerated progress towards education for all, national and internationally agreed targets for poverty reduction will be missed, and inequalities between countries and within societies will widen.

Some countries, like Bangladesh, Brazil and Egypt, have shown that, by setting aside nearly 6% of their gross national product for education, it has been possible to reduce the number of out-of-school children. I am pleased to see that Senegal – which has recently joined the ranks of the least developed countries, and which hosted the World Education Forum last year – has completed its first national education-for-all plan.

The situation of the least developed countries calls for more resources and greater resolve. The situation in some countries is particularly critical, compounded as it is by the devastation wrought by AIDS, internal conflicts and governance crises. This means that we have to devise new educational arrangements and approaches; I am thinking in particular of education in science and technology, technical and vocational education and the new information and communication technologies, which can be invaluable tools for reaching out to the educationally deprived.

We now have a framework for action – that adopted in Dakar – and it should be the starting point for our action in support of the least developed countries. Allow me to summarize its three key features:

First, the main focus of action lies at the national level, with governments bearing the main responsibility for implementing the Dakar objectives. It is for them to set aside a substantial portion of their national budgetary resources for basic education. Each government must also be able to secure the support of its partners, both “internally”, through partnerships with civil society, local communities and the private sector, and “externally”, through assistance from multilateral agencies, international and regional donors, bilateral partners and non-governmental organizations. In order to fulfil faithfully the commitments we made in Dakar, special emphasis must be placed on assistance to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and to the least developed countries in the other regions.

Secondly, there is the need, as a matter of urgency, to prepare or revise national education-for-all plans, by 2002 at the latest. The preparation of the national action plans, through a broad-based participatory process, should make it possible to set timetables for speedier implementation, for all categories of beneficiaries.

The third key feature is that all education-for-all partners must benefit from the current impetus towards action, cooperation and networking. In other words, we must build on what already exists. We must respect and build upon the work accomplished by Member States and development partners over so many years so as to ensure that the right to education becomes a reality for everyone in their personal lives.

Since the Dakar Forum, I have put in place a number of arrangements to enable UNESCO to carry out to the full its appointed role as coordinator of the follow-up to Dakar. Top priority was given to an in-depth reorganization – in structural, budgetary and staffing terms – within the Secretariat and this has been carried out so as to equip it with the means to meet its commitments.

UNESCO has been at pains to give guidance to the various partners so that they can help the countries concerned to draw up their national education-for-all plans. It has also set up an observatory within its Institute for Statistics to provide the information and data needed for setting priorities in the light of specific situations. It also has the task of coordinating fund-raising to help governments implement their education-for-all policies and plans, the participants in the Dakar Forum having solemnly affirmed that “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources”.

But probably its main task is to ensure that this collective impetus towards education for all, which was so greatly strengthened at Dakar, does not falter for one moment, and that all partners keep their sights firmly set on these goals we have fixed for ourselves, and on the target date of 2015 by which time everything should have changed.

All of you here today, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, are the agents of such change. Today, I should like to turn more particularly to those of you who represent what we call “civil society” – non-governmental organizations, the private sector. Not that the other partners are less important. But I have more occasion to meet them and my message is familiar to them. So I should like to tell the representatives of civil society who are among us how crucially important their participation in this common endeavour is. Although it is for States to shoulder their responsibilities for education and deliver a public service of quality, they clearly cannot cope with the sheer volume of demand on their own. I am thinking in particular of the host of actions that can be carried out in non-formal education, including adult education, and of the extraordinary work effectively accomplished by non-governmental organizations in this area. I am also thinking of higher education and research, which have huge funding needs and can form fruitful partnerships with the private sector. Indeed, I should have liked to see your role, particularly that of the non-governmental organizations, more prominently reflected in the plan of action to be adopted at the conclusion of this Conference.

Today, it is estimated that a total of some 872 million adults across the world are illiterate. In the least developed countries – which account for nearly one-tenth of the world’s population – they represent close on 50% of the population, as against a world average of 20%. Most of those who are denied education are girls or women. Of the 113 million children of primary school age who do not go to school, 41% live in the LDCs.

The challenges are enormous. But we must be wary of launching over-hastily into uncoordinated, ill-planned and inadequately targeted emergency operations. The year 2015 is close at hand, but at the same time far enough away to leave each country time to build its plans on sound foundations. We must all, each and every one of us, find a way of participating harmoniously in this great challenge that we have collectively set ourselves. We must all do everything in our power to take up the challenge, and also to learn. To learn to

make more of our own potential, to work better with others and to be more attentive to them. I am confident that this interactive thematic session will give us an opportunity to show that we are determined to meet this challenge.