

Speech by Dr. Karan Singh
Member UNESCO Executive Board (India)
197th session, October 2015

Mr. President; Chairperson of the Executive Board; Madame Director General; Distinguished Members of the Board; Friends and Colleagues,

1. 70 years ago the people of this world made an accord for peace in the aftermath of the horrific devastation wrought by the Second World War. As the Prime Minister of India noted on his visit to UNESCO earlier this year: “The seeds of our collective destiny are sown in human minds.” And no other Organisation has done more to lay the foundations for “more peaceful and sustainable societies” using culture, education, the sciences, as well as other areas of its mandate, as has UNESCO. We have achieved much in the past seven decades in our mission to educate the children of the world, strive to save our planet from cultural and environmental destruction and encourage the benign applications of science. And yet we are still far from achieving the goals that we have set out to reach. As a founding member of this organisation, India sees the 70th anniversary as much an occasion for celebration of UNESCO’s achievements as a moment for reflection on the path UNESCO should take into the future.

2. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in New York last month is a significant marker on that road. It recognises that what the world needs today is a transformative approach to the problems confronting our planet which will address the challenges of today while building the capacities and character for facing the uncertainties of tomorrow. UNESCO has a critical role in the articulation of our vision for education, science and culture for sustainable development, and in translating that vision within the framework of the post-2015 Developmental Agenda. It is UNESCO's firm belief that Education is the light to guide the way to eliminating gender inequities, to reducing poverty, to creating a sustainable planet, and to fostering peace. And in a knowledge economy, education is the new currency by which nations maintain economic competitiveness and global prosperity; the bedrock on which we must try to build an enlightened society committed to the universal values of compassion, pluralism, respect for women, inclusion of the marginalized and amelioration of the deprived.
3. The success of the World Education Forum earlier this year is testimony to UNESCO's unparalleled leadership in Education. It should now seek to build on that success and the lessons of the EFA

(Education for All) experience to ensure that the “Education 2030: Framework for Action”, which will be adopted during the 38th General Conference, renders our educational goals achievable, acceptable and relevant to all countries, while acknowledging their unique national contexts and socio-economic diversities. But if we are to attain this transformative agenda, we will need to go beyond dichotomous and conflictual modes of thought that see the world as a battleground between developed and developing countries, believers and non-believers, liberals and conservatives, and move towards ensuring cooperation for the implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The contemporary discussion on education will have to revolve around an integrated, holistic philosophy in which human existence is looked upon as a gift to be utilised both for inner development and for the welfare of society and the world.

4. UNESCO will need to leverage all its resources and strengths if we are to achieve our goal. This may well entail a recalibration of UNESCO’s priorities and programmes in the years ahead. And I say with the utmost confidence that the New Delhi based Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) – a Category-I UNESCO institute which I have the honour

of Chairing – stands ready to help Governments transform education systems, drawing on UNESCO’s experience and inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s legacy.

5. And yet, even as we seek to build and transform, we see around us the pillage and destruction of centuries of priceless heritage, perpetrated through barbaric attacks of violent extremism taking place with an alarming frequency around the world. We saw this earlier with the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, and sadly we are seeing this again in Iraq and Syria, Yeman and Mali. This wanton destruction of humanity’s cultural heritage must stop. We commend the Director General for her spirited response through the social media for providing a counter narrative to sectarian propaganda, and in exploring ways for bringing this issue to the frontlines of peace efforts. Together, we must put forward a new narrative of shared values, of humanity as a single family, convinced that we need to make new alliances to meet the challenges of violent extremism.
6. And as we brace ourselves for this new thrust, we must pause to ask: what are the ethical and moral values that must inform, permeate and pervade this process of transformation? Drawing on our global heritage of humanistic thought, I can offer some values that are central

to India's consciousness: Equality, unity, an outlook of friendship and cooperation, harmonious relations between various sects and religions, a sense of duty and responsibility towards the environment, an approach based on integrity, selflessness and the spirit of service aimed at a harmonious global society based on Interfaith understanding and peaceful conflict resolution.

7. Friends, we are at the crossroads of a momentous turn in history. We have been entrusted with the responsibility of transforming the world and leaving a positive legacy for generations yet unborn. Our ability to shoulder that responsibility will rest on our ability to come up with creative answers to the new challenges posed to us, while remaining true to our long-term ideals. There must be a sense of urgency because, as the Chinese saying goes, "It is later than you think." And as the Sanskrit saying goes, "Sidhir Bhavati Karmaja", "Success is born of Action". Now is the time for action.

(TOTAL 962 WORDS)