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The ambitious aspirations of the Africa of the 1960s, when political independence dawned, were surrounded by an atmosphere of extraordinary optimism, soon to be dashed by reality.

Africa, the cradle of human civilization, has for many decades been mired in grave crisis. Indeed, it has been afflicted by profound political challenges and upheavals, debilitating conflicts between and within countries, economic and social crises, deepening poverty, rampant environmental degradation, debilitating pandemics, and disheartening educational failures.

Too many false starts and hopes, too many untested programmes and externally conceived social engineering approaches, too many ill-guided conditionalities have brought about a situation where Africa is seen as being marginalized and out of the mainstream of the international system and interaction. The ongoing process of globalization is further accentuating this already troublesome handicap.

All this has been aggravated by a dramatic decline in ODA to Africa, compounded by the fact that foreign direct investment (FDI) flows – the hoped-for panacea for a different development take-off – have essentially bypassed African countries.

It is increasingly apparent that the proliferation of many programmes and action plans developed by the international community with and for Africa have largely remained ineffective and unfulfilled.

Yet there are grounds for optimism. The new century is opening with signs of renewal and hope. Economic growth has returned to the Continent. Although still faltering, the population growth rates have begun to decline. Democratization is edging forward and fostering political involvement, greater responsibility and accountability and new forms of sound governance and methods of development.

First is the new political will within Africa to tackle its development challenges head on, and seize and build on African-bred, African-led and African-owned opportunities. But more significant still is the way in which, over recent months, African leaders have articulated and developed well-founded and realistic visions linked to concrete action programmes and priorities, cast in the context of accelerated regional and subregional integration.

The « Millennium Plan for African Renaissance », the « Omega Plan », and the « Compact Plan » all testify to the fact that the leadership and vision for sustainable development of Africa exists, no longer dominated by external solutions and prescriptions for social change, but intent on seizing the challenges “in the African way”. This calls in particular for innovative approaches and solutions that are integrated and bold, eschewing despair and drawing on the formidable dynamism and riches of the Continent and its peoples which is only asking to be released.

UNESCO is committed to being guided by and contributing to these genuine African initiatives, indeed to embracing their vision. There can be no separate UNESCO vision which does not respond to the political will and the strategies articulated by the Continent and its leaders. This will be the approach followed by UNESCO in addressing Africa and African needs and concerns throughout all its programmes. In short, UNESCO’s guiding principles will be “heeding and helping”.

In so doing, UNESCO will be fully committed to implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration and its development targets, which has placed the goal of halving extreme poverty by the year 2015 at its centre. UNESCO has aligned its strategies and programmes fully with this central priority of the international community.

To be effective, poverty eradication requires effective action in education, the sciences, culture and communication – all main areas of UNESCO’s competence. UNESCO is well-placed and indeed poised to work concretely and in synergy with African governments, other UN agencies and bilateral partners, civil society and the private sector to make an effective contribution.

There is much UNESCO can do to help. Its specific contribution stems from the particular expertise it brings together in its main fields of competence, all of which are signaled as top-of-the-agenda priorities by Member States, and also by the unique interactions it is stimulating among them. At the centre of the stage is knowledge, the key to capacity-building.

The goals of developing knowledge societies encompass education in its broadest sense, including science and technology, integrating the vital local cultural dimensions without which it is alien and ineffective, caring about the values and ethics of societies, and individuals’ basic human rights, and ensuring that the flows of communication and information, bolstered by the new technologies, feed the knowledge bases of all individuals.

Education is thus a precondition for development and for ensuring economic growth and combating poverty. The World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000 confirmed UNESCO as the coordinator of the « Education for All » partners and charged it with the task of maintaining their collective momentum. The realization of the goals of the Dakar Framework for Action is the overriding priority for UNESCO's education strategy, covering both formal and non-formal education, reinforcing quality education and diversifying delivery mechanisms. A vigorous and effective follow-up to Dakar is at the heart of all our work and is currently shaping the activities of the entire Organization.

In the context of the international resolve to combat HIV/AIDS, education requires yet another critically important function. Through preventive education, UNESCO is determined to make an effective contribution to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Disadvantaged groups such as women, youth and children are among the most affected. The approach to halting HIV/AIDS must be firmly embedded in local cultural realities and must be combined with the promotion of scientific research and awareness-raising related to the manifold ethical challenges.

In the area of science and technology, the challenge is for Africa to seize the opportunities offered by the new information technologies within our overall attempt to bridge the digital divide. In this regard, UNESCO will support institutional and human capacity-building on the African continent, in particular through a regional and decentralized approach, while simultaneously promoting the expression of pluralism and cultural diversity in the media and world information networks.

The complexities of the contemporaneous and globalizing world increasingly require sound scientific advice and bases for decision-making. The 1999 World Conference on Science has charted the way for UNESCO to support and promote scientific cooperation at all levels, drawing on its unique comparative advantage of combining natural and human sciences under one roof. Water and ecosystems are of the highest priority for UNESCO activities in Africa, since the timeliness and urgency of addressing freshwater issues has become widely recognized as a key component of human and environmental security. And security is inseparably linked with sustainable development.

Democracy, good governance, peace, security, stability and justice are among the essential factors in pursuing Africa's development. To help preserve peace in all its dimensions is a vision embedded in UNESCO's constitution, and its commitment to fostering a culture of peace is as relevant for the African continent as ever. As the lead agency for the *United Nations Decade for a*

Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, the deployment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in development thinking and practice, especially in education, remains an abiding task for the Organization.

To achieve these goals, knowledge and capability will be key. The leaders of virtually all countries in the world have professed their desire to transform their countries into learning economies and knowledge societies. Africa must be among them. The active participation of Africa's vivid communities and diligent representatives of civil society will help ensure genuine participation and empowerment in the process. The reformed UNESCO stands ready at this critical cross-roads to assist Africa, guided by African aspirations, concepts and approaches, in moving ahead to create a better brighter future for the peoples of Africa.