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Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

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

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(MINEDAF VIII)

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Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers,
UN Colleagues,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you most warmly to this, the eighth meeting of the Ministers of Education of Africa (MINEDAF VIII). On this important occasion on the calendar of Africa, we are called upon to meet the challenges facing education in Africa at the beginning of the 21st century and, in particular, to effect the transition from commitments to action, from words to deeds. Four years on from MINEDAF VII in Durban, South Africa, our collective task could not be clearer and I am confident that all of us agree that action must be our priority. Frankly, nothing less will do.

Yesterday, at the closing ceremony of the constitutive conference establishing the Forum of African Parliamentarians for Education (FAPED), I spoke of the crucial importance of political will for achieving the goals that African countries have set for themselves. Our meeting this week is a golden opportunity to harness the political will of the assembled Ministers of Education and the goodwill of many development partners in a common cause, namely, making education the priority of Africa and making African education the priority of its partners.

I would like to express my great appreciation to you, President Mkapa, for accepting the offer to host this conference. Your beautiful country is providing a most welcoming environment for our deliberations this week. I very much appreciate President Bouteflika's message of support, which he has sent as he is unable to attend in person. We are also honoured by the presence of Mr Amara Essy, Interim Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union; Professor Kader Asmal, whose country chaired the last MINEDAF meeting; Dr Ng'wandu, who will chair MINEDAF VIII; Ms Carole Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF; Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS; and Ms Jennifer Chiwela of the African Network Campaign for EFA (ANCEFA). Please note that many other partners are present here today or have contributed to the preparatory phases leading up to this meeting. On behalf of UNESCO, and in my own name, I thank you all.

Let me begin by looking at some of the main difficulties facing education in Africa. I would like initially to draw your attention to those problems that originate outside the education system itself, of which there are many: the disruption and destructiveness of wars, internal conflict and political instability; weak economic performance and widespread poverty; the effect of diseases such

as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria; the recurrence of famine; the fragility of democracy and good governance; and the social, cultural and ethnic divisions which are structured into the very fabric of African societies.

In making such a list, my purpose is neither to paint a pessimistic picture, nor to deny that there are positive developments in the continent. My purpose is to acknowledge that the wider context of African education is full of difficulties and that these external factors have a direct impact as well as an indirect influence on educational processes. The effects take the form of school buildings destroyed or occupied by soldiers; the teacher who dies of AIDS and is not replaced, thereby leading to the closure of the school; funds for the purchase of new textbooks or laboratory equipment languishing in unspent budgets or somehow disappearing; children who go to school without having eaten.

In this perspective, education is very much at the mercy of forces outside its control and this is certainly part of the reality we face. But it strikes me with great clarity that, for each of the external problems I have identified, education is not simply the victim but is also part of the solution. Indeed, education plays a crucial role in overcoming these difficulties through education for peace, tolerance, human rights and mutual understanding; through education for emergencies and post-conflict reconstruction; through education and training of the human resources needed for development, economic success and poverty reduction; through preventive education to combat disease and ill-health; through curricula attuned to sustainable development; through citizenship education; and through education for inter-cultural dialogue and the celebration of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. I am proud to say that UNESCO is working in all of these areas.

The comparative severity of Africa's educational situation has been recently revealed by the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002, which was prepared to inform the meeting of the High-Level Group on EFA that met two weeks ago in Abuja, Nigeria. According to the Report, 28 countries are at serious risk of not achieving any of the three measurable Dakar goals by 2015 at current rates of progress. Twenty countries in Sub-Saharan Africa fall into this category. Six other sub-Saharan Africa countries are unlikely to achieve at least one of these goals (universal primary education, gender equality and adult literacy).

Please note that these estimations are couched in conditional terms. The statistical trends on which they are based apply to 'current rates of progress'. Thus, the non-achievement of the three goals is not a firm prediction but an estimation of what is likely to be the case in 2015 if serious measures are not taken. In addition, the statistical data do not reflect progress that may have

occurred in the last two years. Nevertheless, we cannot hide from the fact that addressing Africa's educational challenge involves not a stroll in the foothills but scaling a real Kilimanjaro.

The quantitative scale of the challenges facing education in Africa is impressive. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounts for over 40 million out-of-school children, over one-third (37 per cent) of the world's total of 115.4 million. The Monitoring Report shows that, of the 25 countries that have recorded net enrolment ratios below 70 per cent, 18 are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. Repetition and dropout rates in Africa's schools remain high on average, which means that millions of children never complete the minimum of four or five years of schooling deemed necessary for a secure acquisition of literacy. Our meeting this week should seek to identify those measures that will have the greatest impact on this scenario and to secure assurances that they will be put into effect.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Time forbids an extended diagnosis of Africa's educational ailments; the discussion panels and special sessions will go into greater detail and depth. Let me therefore turn next to the real agenda of this meeting, namely, the transition from commitments to action. The commitments in question are those that national governments and their development partners have made in recent years to address education in particular and also other concerns that have a bearing upon education.

Among the fora devoted specifically to education, pride of place goes to the Dakar conference of April 2000 and its commitment to attain the six EFA goals by 2015 at the latest. Later in the year 2000, the Millennium Assembly made commitments, at the very highest level of political will, on a range of development goals whose achievement would transform our world. As you know, two of the Millennium Development Goals are education-specific (pertaining to universal primary education and gender equality in education). An important follow-up to the Millennium Assembly was the Monterrey Conference held in February 2002, whose paradigm of partnership and responsibility in the financing of development has helped to reinvigorate the world's development agenda.

My purpose here is not to rehearse each and every commitment but to focus attention on key considerations of strategic importance for the transition from commitments to action. Let me now turn to certain areas of education in Africa where action is most needed.

EFA in the context of facilitating lifelong learning is at the core of UNESCO's work and indeed that of all the partners. No aspect of basic education in Africa should be left out of account. Thus, greater efforts need to be directed towards early childhood care and education, which is the foundation of lifelong learning and an integral part of basic education. Countries need to develop and implement an integrated policy on early childhood so that attention is directed to the child's learning as well as to his/her healthy growth and nutritional needs. Support to families should be an integral part of government policy and programmes regarding early childhood.

With regard to primary education, I would like to stress the importance of each country having one education system sufficiently diversified to meet the needs of all children. Such an education system will increasingly tend to be multi-partner in character, utilizing multiple delivery channels and various types of learning locations.

By "one education system", I recommend a holistic sector-wide approach. I urge you to ensure a close linkage between the renovation of the basic education system – including the nonformal providers – and appropriate adjustments to your secondary, technical-vocational and higher education systems. After all, in addition to having their own particular requirements, these higher levels are the natural sources of qualified, well-prepared teachers, administrators and researchers whose professional capacities are vital for improving basic education.

One of the key EFA goals is that of reducing the world's rate of illiteracy by 50 per cent by 2015. To ensure that all can benefit from education, all must be literate. Today, an estimated 862 million people in the world are not! In order to address this issue, the United Nations General Assembly, through Resolution 56/116, has designated 2003-2012 to be the international decade for literacy. Recognizing the potential contribution of literacy to eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development and democracy, the nations of the world have agreed that special efforts should be made to boost literacy in the years ahead.

We call upon all of you therefore to participate actively in the literacy decade, as one of the key mechanisms towards achieving the goals of Dakar. Literacy in Africa, especially for African women and girls, must be a priority in all our actions.

At this point, I would like to briefly discuss the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact on education in Africa. This disease is threatening many of the gains in educational expansion and education system development during past decades. Education systems are in double jeopardy from HIV/AIDS: if they fail, the epidemic will accelerate – and when the epidemic spreads, it undermines the capacity of education systems to cope.

Ignorance about the epidemic and what causes it is deadly. But knowledge is often not enough to change behaviour. Preventive education must make people aware that they are at risk, and why – and how stigma and discrimination fuel the spread of the disease. The epidemic not only hampers development – in many countries, it reverses it by destroying capacity, especially the capacity to cope and the capacity to care. The high rates of death among teachers, health workers and other trained professionals will make replacements increasingly hard to find. And children and the young are at risk on an unprecedented scale. Children will lose parents at home and teachers at school – and many youth will grow up deprived, under-socialized and disconnected.

It is estimated that an additional one billion dollars annually are required to help education systems cope with the impact of AIDS as well as deliver effective HIV preventive education. It is surprising and distressing that, even in countries with established epidemics, teachers are still not being trained to help school children and themselves prevent and cope with HIV. To an extent that has yet to be fully recognized, this epidemic requires a fundamental reconsideration of how educational services can be provided in many countries.

In all educational activity, teachers are of fundamental importance. Teacher shortage, therefore, is a major constraint upon expansion and quality improvement. It has been estimated that at least three million additional teachers will be needed by 2015 in sub-Saharan Africa alone if the EFA goals are to be minimally met. At present, however, the tragedy of HIV/AIDS is decimating the ranks of teachers. And there are other problems too: teachers' status, for example. Only a few years ago, the best and the brightest of young people in Africa would have been attracted by the prestige and importance of the teaching profession. Today, they are increasingly attracted to other professions. Consequently, many current recruits are under-qualified.

All teachers are entitled to decent working conditions. The recent ILO/UNESCO document "A Statistical Profile of the Teaching Profession" describes how far the current reality falls short of minimum standards regarding working and training conditions. To this end, and in keeping with an agreement from a previous meeting of MINEDAF on the creation of Centres of Excellence,

UNESCO has embarked on an initiative to upgrade one major teacher training institution in each of the 46 sub-Saharan countries. The upgrading will be based on the assessed needs of the country and the institution. This initiative is aimed at improving teacher skills and thereby enhancing educational quality.

I urge you to include among your recommendations for action the improvement of the working conditions of teachers, and then to implement these recommendations. For, as our colleagues in the teachers' unions tell us, the working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of children. We need to work together to improve these working and learning conditions.

Another key area for urgent action is that of gender equality. More than 50 years have passed since the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and it is more than 30 years since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. And yet women and girls world-wide, and those in Africa in particular, do not enjoy equal rights to education.

Together with South Asia, Africa, especially the sub-Saharan Africa region, shares the majority of the world's illiterates and out-of-school children, the majority of whom are female. Certainly, some countries have made remarkable progress in girls' education and there are a number of innovative programmes in the region, but overall results are still far from satisfactory.

The challenges ahead of us are indeed enormous, but we must do the maximum possible in coming years for the sake not only of girls' and women's education but for the very credibility of the EFA endeavour. I urge you in your discussions to take account of the practical measures that have a proven effectiveness in addressing gender equality issues. These address problems both inside and outside of school. Safe travel to school, the provision of separate sanitation facilities for girls, increased numbers of female and gender-sensitive teachers, curricula and textbooks that are not only gender-sensitive but also relevant and useful to girls and their families, and classroom and school management practices that are free from gender bias – these are some of the measures through which impediments to girls' education can be overcome.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like now to briefly consider certain instruments of action through which our commitments in Africa will be achieved. The creation of the African Union and NEPAD are most promising developments. It is especially heartening to observe that African leaders have embraced the key international

commitments made in recent years within their vision of African development. In NEPAD's action plan for education, the Heads of State reaffirm that "Africa's development begins with the quality of its human resources", the very area in which the international community has an abiding interest and is seeking to translate this interest to action. NEPAD has rapidly become the agreed Africa-wide framework within which the relationship between education and development will be played out in the period ahead. Rest assured that UNESCO will do all it can to contribute to NEPAD's success.

The cultivation of new partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society is vital for translating commitments into action. Considerable international consultation already takes place, including a mechanism for collective consultation with NGOs on EFA. The participation of African organizations, coalitions and networks has increased considerably, especially through the strong involvement of the African Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA). Capacity-building programmes to reinforce civil society participation have been launched. Indeed, the very process of this meeting reveals that progress is being made. Not only is civil society eminently represented on this platform, but there has been a preparatory meeting with civil society representatives, a civil society paper has been tabled, civil society representatives are included in every panel and there is a Ministers/NGO consultation to discuss partnership experiences and to elaborate strategies of collaboration beyond this meeting. Together with other partners, UNESCO is working hard to strengthen the capacities of NGOs and other parts of civil society so that the development of education in Africa is a truly participatory and inclusive process.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have taken note of the new spirit of resolve and optimism expressed by African leaders as they commit themselves to an African Renaissance. UNESCO and all the partners are committed to support this resolve and to buttress this optimism.

For its part, UNESCO is acting on the commitments I have described through all the means at its disposal: through its Education sector at Headquarters; through its regional education office in Dakar; through its cluster and national offices at the country level; through its National Commissions in Member States; through its institutes – the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), the International Bureau of Education (IBE), the UNESCO Institute of Education (UIE), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), and the International Institute for Capacity-Building in Africa (IICBA) based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; through its centres, notably the Guidance, Counseling and

Youth Development Centre for Africa, in Lilongwe, Malawi; through its special programmes like the PEER operation for the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region; and through its networks such as the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme and the Associated Schools Project. Indeed, in my vision of UNESCO as a networking organization, these and other aspects of our capacity are enhanced by their inter-linkage and by dovetailing with the activities of all our partners.

Let me assure you that UNESCO will do its utmost to assist and support you in your efforts. I urge you, Ministers of Education, to draw upon Africa's wealth of resources, energy and potential, and to invest wisely in your most important resource, the people of Africa. For now is the time to translate commitments into action.

Thank you.