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Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of the Meeting of Ministers of Education of
Portuguese-speaking Countries in Africa (PALOP) and Equatorial Guinea

Sao Tome, 13 January 2004

Madam Prime Minister of Sao Tome and Principe,
Mr Minister of Education of Sao Tome and Principe,
Ministers,
Mr Deputy Executive Secretary of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP),
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that my visit to Africa, which took me first to Accra, in Ghana, then Abidjan, in Côte d'Ivoire, is continuing with this stay in Sao Tome and Principe. That my first official trip of 2004 has brought me to Africa, and that it is mostly concerned with education – by the end of the trip I will have taken part in three major regional conferences of ministers on education for all in Accra, here in Sao Tome and then in Yaoundé at the end of the week – speaks volumes about my personal commitment and that of UNESCO to giving Africa full attention in this crucial field.

I should like to thank you most sincerely, Madam Prime Minister, for the warm welcome you have extended to my delegation and myself. The gala evening that you held in my honour and the traditional dances staged then were most impressive.

It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to be here beside the Prime Minister to take part in the opening ceremony of the Meeting of Ministers of Education of Angola, Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Sao Tome and Principe. The organization that you have established on the basis of a shared language – Portuguese – and, and above all, shared historical ties, and political will to work together, in the case of Equatorial Guinea, places you in a special position in relation to the various other subregional and regional organizations in which you participate elsewhere. I should therefore like to thank the Minister of Education and Culture of Sao Tome and Principe wholeheartedly for agreeing to host this ministerial meeting, which is the first real meeting of give and take among PALOP's educational authorities.

The African Portuguese-speaking countries' membership of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), founded in July 1996, attests to PALOP's determination to expand and reinforce international cooperation for development. The association of peoples of the seven Portuguese-speaking countries, which should now include Timor-Leste, is more than a language community born of history; it is also an economic area, a political and cultural organization, making Portuguese the language of one of the major world groupings and the bond that holds together a fully-fledged international body. The bond of this shared language alone enables resources to be pooled for educational, cultural and political action by countries that individually would unquestionably be weaker in the context of globalization, as evidenced by action taken at the diplomatic level and the many agreements signed and implemented under the Praia General Cooperation Agreement (1998) and plan of action on cooperation in the field of distance education, higher education, educational evaluation and technical and vocational education.

Since their independence, which occurred more recently than that of other African countries, the members of the group have shown great dynamism and a considerable capacity for organization in building education systems that extend and complete the political liberation movement and lay the foundations of development. This has been an arduous task, given the major crises and conflicts that some countries of the group have experienced, with the attendant destruction of the economic and social infrastructure, the collapse of education systems, the loss of life and large number of disabled citizens.

Prime Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The meeting of Ministers of Education opening today on the theme “Strengthening cooperation in education” is wholly in line with the process of implementing the recommendations of the Dakar Framework for Action. The World Education Forum advocated a new vision of African renaissance and a solid alliance at the subregional and regional levels, for it is clear that together African countries are a powerful force capable of achieving a genuine paradigm shift and ensuring the investment needed for education.

By adopting the Global Framework for Action for Education for All by 2015, the international community undertook to support the universal provision of basic education while improving the quality of education. One year after the Eighth Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States (MINEDAF VIII) and almost four years after the Dakar Forum, the time has come for the concepts developed regionally and internationally to be firmly rooted in specific strategies that may be applied locally. As the subregional level very often consists of well-rounded economic, social and cultural bodies, that fosters debate on local problems and enables several countries to pool their resources – financial, intellectual, infrastructural and human – to provide a most appropriate response to the national challenges facing each of your countries.

At the global level these challenges are immense and we must remain very humble in view of their magnitude. We can however welcome progress made, in particular through the driving force of the EFA High-Level Group. It is though becoming clearer that better synergy must be achieved between, on the one hand, worldwide mobilization and coordination for education for all and, on the other, regional and subregional institutions and processes. The latter deserve to be strengthened and encouraged because they are a key means of transmission between the global and the local levels. I believe that this conference fits perfectly into this context, and this can only be gratifying.

As they have endorsed this view, the Portuguese-speaking Countries in Africa (PALOP) and Equatorial Guinea have each drawn up an education for all national action plan, which is currently being adjusted and finalized. Allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude to the education authorities here today for their hard work and their determination to make these plans credible tools for mobilizing resources.

You may regard my participation in your meeting as a token of UNESCO’s unreserved support for your education for all goals. We must seize the advantage to put PALOP in a better position in the drive to achieve development, which African Heads of State have launched through the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). This is no doubt a general framework from which many education initiatives may emerge and develop. The strategies and activities must be designed in response to principles and priorities shared by all, particularly those of the Dakar Framework for Action, the Millennium Declaration and the Decade for African Education. The Dar es Salaam Statement of Commitment must also remain very present in our minds: in particular, it entails strengthened dialogue among African countries on education policies, which should tend towards a single, specifically African frame of reference; more intensive exchange of information, experience and experts in the field of education in general, including non-formal education and adult literacy; strengthening the Guidance, Counselling and Youth Development Centre for Africa as a centre of excellence for the advancement and capacity-building of regional programmes geared to meet the needs of girls and adolescents at risk; and the production of teaching materials, teacher training, the use of the new information and communication technologies, and the creation of centres of excellence for training, teaching and research.

To move from these statements of commitment to practical action, this conference aims in particular to examine joint cooperation programmes among countries on, for instance, training for teacher trainers, training in educational planning, statistics and school mapping, and the production of teaching materials, which is very relevant in the context of a single language.

It is therefore necessary here, perhaps more than anywhere else, to synergize existing human and material resources in a spirit of complementarity and to avoid any wastage of resources and effort while pursuing and accomplishing the goals of education for all.

The community of language and the shared cultural and historic ties have already enabled PALOP in the past to take part in joint subregional initiatives, such as education projects supported by UNESCO. Since March 2000 and the signature of the Cooperation Agreement between UNESCO and PALOP and Equatorial Guinea, a new stage of cooperation, the stage of complementarity, has begun. The pooling of scarce resources, the free flow of information, the dissemination of successful experiments, the pooling of expertise in each country and the establishment of joint working groups on key issues may create synergies to optimize the use of resources and the impact of efforts to achieve the goals of education for all.

Prime Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I fervently hope that this meeting of Ministers of Education of Portuguese-speaking Countries in Africa (PALOP) and Equatorial Guinea, marked by the dominant theme of complementarity, will adopt firm resolutions from which guidelines and mechanisms for future fruitful and productive cooperation may be derived.

I therefore wish you every success in your work which, I am sure, will produce substantive results in the form of joint programmes and activities that will give practical expression to your common determination to make quality basic education for all a reality in your respective countries. You may be assured that UNESCO, at Headquarters but also and above all through its various cluster offices throughout the continent, which I have endeavoured to strengthen to meet your needs better, in conjunction with the UNESCO Office in Dakar and Regional Bureau for Education in Africa, will act with due care and attention in implementing the integrative programmes that will result from this meeting.

Thank you for your attention.