

DG/2004/033
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

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

on the occasion of the meeting of Parliamentarians

Mbabane, Swaziland, 2 March 2004

Honourable Minister of Education,
Distinguished Parliamentarians,
Madam Professor,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be making my first official visit to the Kingdom of Swaziland at the kind invitation of your Government. Swaziland is a special country and I am delighted to be here.

I arrived here yesterday and I immediately had an audience with His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen Mother, in the presence of the Prime Minister.

This morning, I am very pleased and honoured to have the opportunity to address this important gathering. In my remarks to you, I would like to place emphasis on the vital role of parliamentarians in all aspects of African development and also their part in advancing UNESCO's activities in African countries. I believe that the work of African parliamentarians is becoming more and more important, especially in the perspective of NEPAD and the African Union.

Political systems around the world take many forms but wherever there is a parliament or national assembly or congress, the representatives are a crucial link between the people and the polity. They are not only leaders and shapers of public opinion but they are also recognized and legitimate vehicles through which the people's needs and wishes can be expressed. Through their conscientious labours, they can help to ensure that legislative and decision-making processes are relevant and responsive.

For UNESCO, parliamentarians have long been valued partners with whom it has worked closely and productively in many areas of common interest. It is important that parliamentarians are both aware and supportive of UNESCO's Constitutional mandate and the work it undertakes in its fields of competence – education, the natural sciences, the social and human sciences, culture and communication and information. By the same token, UNESCO is keen to listen to Parliamentarians and learn more about the needs and concerns of the people they represent.

In recent years, our partnership has been developing in several positive directions. I would particularly like to bring to your attention an initiative that was launched at the 32nd session of UNESCO's General Conference last October. In essence, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UNESCO have decided to create a permanent institutional link between UNESCO and Parliamentarians, which will take the form of a network of focal points within each Parliament that is an IPU member. The role of the focal points will be to build close relations, at the national level,

between the National Commissions for UNESCO and Parliaments. I sincerely hope that Swaziland will join us in this enterprise.

Another important initiative is, of course, the Forum of African Parliamentarians for Education (FAPED), which was created in December 2002 in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) on the initiative of the Parliaments of Mauritius and Senegal, on the occasion of MINEDAF VIII, where the Ministers of Education of Africa were gathered. Swaziland's participation in this constitutive meeting was most welcome.

As a continental grouping and network of African Parliamentarians, FAPED is an extremely useful political instrument in the fight against illiteracy, poverty, HIV/AIDS and gender inequality through educational programmes and projects. In particular, FAPED is a major partner for UNESCO in the drive to promote Education for All on the African continent and to achieve the goals agreed at the World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal) in April 2000. Last month, during a visit to Mauritius, I addressed the closing ceremony of the second meeting of the FAPED Board, where the stress on the importance of education and capacity-building was clearly in evidence. MINEDAF IX will take place in 2006 in Mauritius at the invitation of the Mauritius Government. I hope FAPED will hold its meeting on that occasion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This brings me to one of UNESCO's major preoccupations today, namely, the global drive towards quality basic education for all (EFA). Along with its other EFA partners, UNESCO recognizes the importance of ensuring that parliamentarians take an active and well-informed interest in EFA. Indeed, you form part of the political will that must be further strengthened if commitments are to be translated into practice. EFA in Swaziland needs your support, for example, when it comes to the passage of relevant legislation and the debate of educational policies and programmes. It is my understanding that Swaziland's Plan of Action for Education for All is almost ready and will be submitted to the Parliament for approval. Let me recall that the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000 identified six key EFA goals with specific targets for 2015. Monitoring implementation of the six Dakar goals is an important aspect of national EFA plans. The Swaziland EFA Plan of Action will be a vital aspect of the overall development effort of Swaziland in coming years, in which case I encourage you to ensure that it is fully integrated with the agreed national development framework.

In my view, EFA should, in all countries, be a matter of national consensus on which all parts of the national community are agreed. Parliamentarians can play an important role in building and maintaining such a consensus.

The EFA challenge, of course, is huge. Education systems face many internal problems but, in addition, they must address trends and developments in society at large which, in one way or another, have an adverse impact on educational processes and institutions. I refer, in particular, to the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is having a major impact on many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Swaziland. The direct effect of HIV/AIDS on a person's health, well-being and life expectancy is one thing, but there are serious secondary effects upon society and the economy too, as you are witnessing in your own country. For example, the number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS is growing – according to one estimate, as many as 120,000 children under 15 years of age will have lost both parents to AIDS by 2010.

In addition, there are acute problems caused by the fact that growing numbers of teachers are succumbing to AIDS. This prompted UNESCO, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Swaziland, to devise a project on 'Capacity-building in Teacher Education' which is now underway, financed through Japanese Funds-in-Trust. This is an important initiative which will involve the country's four teacher training institutions, the University of Swaziland Education Department, the Ministry of Education and the UNESCO Windhoek Cluster Office.

I should add that UNESCO is working very closely with the SADC Secretariat on a number of joint projects, several of which address AIDS-related issues, including prevention education. Furthermore, as the Minister of Education perhaps knows, I am a joint organizer of a meeting with the Ministers of Education, Health and Finance from SADC countries, which will be held on 3rd and 4th March in Livingstone, Zambia, in association with the meeting of the Committee of the Cosponsoring Organizations of UNAIDS, of which I am currently the chairperson. I am pleased that three Ministers from Swaziland will be attending these events, thereby showing their interest and commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sub-Saharan Africa is the priority region within UNESCO's plans and programmes at the present time. We are doing our utmost, through the Organization's Regular Programme and Budget and through a continuous search for extra-budgetary funding, to support the region's development. In this regard, we see the African Union and NEPAD as crucial frameworks through which we can engage with countries and other development partners. 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. NEPAD's emphasis upon improving the quality of Africa's human resources matches UNESCO's orientation and programmatic priorities. Rest assured that UNESCO is working closely with NEPAD on educational issues and is deepening its partnership in other areas too, including science and technology. In fact, UNESCO has been designated the lead

agency for the NEPAD Science and Technology Cluster through which we shall endeavour to promote innovative and effective ways of harnessing science and technology to efforts to reduce poverty and promote economic growth.

In conclusion, let me return to the pivotal role that parliamentarians must play in the development process in Africa. I encourage you to address your country's needs and circumstances with particular attention to education. I also urge you to engage constructively with the broader context of regional frameworks and networks through which Africans are taking command of their destiny. This has been my dream ever since I began my diplomatic career in West Africa over forty years ago. Now, as Director-General of UNESCO, I can assure you of our support in making this dream come true in the years ahead.

Thank you.