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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the International Meeting
on the University Community and EFA

UNESCO, 3 November 2004

Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome you here to UNESCO for this meeting on how to bring universities and the wider higher education community into the broad partnership to achieve education for all (EFA) and the millennium development goals (MDGs). Thank you all for coming and for your willingness to share your ideas, expertise and experience.

The main purpose of this two-day meeting is to open dialogue with the higher education community in order to identify ways and means of using the comparative advantages of higher education institutions, and in particular universities, to advance towards the achievement of the global goals. In the process, I believe that you will see more clearly how important the EFA agenda is for you.

It is just over four years since the World Education Forum on Education for All was held in Dakar, Senegal. This Forum, which was informed by the assessment of progress since the first such global meeting at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, brought us face-to-face with the reality of continuing serious inequities in education and how much still needs to be done to make quality basic education available to all. The Forum adopted a Framework for Action which articulated six key goals and twelve supportive strategies whose aim was that, within a period of fifteen years, major visible improvements would be achieved in access to and the quality of basic education.

The consensus of the Dakar meeting was that education for all is important for its own sake, as a basic right and as a fundamental need, but it is also important as a key contributor to processes of social transformation whereby the lives and livelihoods of people everywhere can be improved. Education, of course, is no magic pill that by itself can solve all development problems but without it, no development strategy can hope to succeed.

Since Dakar, progress has been made in many countries but there are still countries which, unless present trends are changed for the better, will not attain universal primary education, gender equity in education or the other EFA goals by 2015. Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. There have been major constraints to reckon with, not least the impact on education and society of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many countries, furthermore, have not escaped from the effects of instability and violent conflict, which are a great source of disruption to education systems. In addition, many countries are mired in debt and burdensome repayment schedules which constrain their capacity to address key domestic needs like poverty reduction and educational expansion. Those countries most in need also

tend to lack sufficient trained teachers and the resources to improve the quality of educational processes. In sum, much remains to be done.

At the Dakar Forum, UNESCO was given a two-fold challenge. First, it was to continue its role as the international coordinator of the EFA movement, seeking to mobilize further action and to maintain the collaborative momentum of the EFA partners. Second, UNESCO was asked to place EFA at the heart of its own programmatic work. We have sought earnestly to fulfil these challenges, as has been acknowledged by the Organization's Executive Board in its reception of a strategic review that I prepared of UNESCO's post-Dakar role in education for all. At the same time, it is clear that we could have done some things better and that, in order to address the scale and character of the EFA challenge that remains, UNESCO must enhance its contribution and re-galvanize its action.

It is against the background I have just sketched that UNESCO is taking steps to renew its drive and impetus in the EFA movement. We are under no illusion that UNESCO can or should be responsible for EFA in its entirety. Indeed, national governments must be the lead actors at the country level, supported by civil society, development partners and international organizations. UNESCO, however, must enhance its performance of its lead coordinating role in the Dakar follow-up process and develop a leading advocacy role to promote education efforts worldwide, raise the international profile of the global educational challenges we all face and galvanize international efforts to address them. Our aim is to strengthen EFA partnerships and commitment in the perspective that "Education for all is the business of all".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting with the university community takes a large part of its meaning and significance from this context in which UNESCO is seeking to broaden and strengthen EFA partnerships and to promote more creative, proactive and dynamic interventions within the EFA movement. It is the first meeting at the international level at which the views of the higher education community will be brought to bear comprehensively upon the EFA agenda.

This is not to say that higher education has until now been absent from EFA processes; this is far from the case. In many countries, for example, it is in universities where teachers are recruited, educated and trained. University departments of education are places where valuable educational research relevant to EFA is undertaken and where educational administrators and tomorrow's educational researchers are groomed. In other fields, such as the natural sciences, engineering, the social sciences, languages and the arts, universities are actively involved in producing and disseminating knowledge which eventually finds its way into classrooms,

curricula, examination syllabi, textbooks and learning materials in primary and secondary education. Indeed, the influence of higher education upon the rest of the education system is pervasive.

UNESCO perceives EFA in holistic terms, taking into its sphere all types and levels of education, each complementing and supporting the other throughout the life-span. UNESCO endeavours to bring this integrated vision to all its educational work. At the same time, the EFA drive goes beyond academic performance alone by supporting the full development of the learner. This is even more critical as globalization advances and information and knowledge become more accessible to all. Critical thinking and the acquisition of values and attitudes that build both personal identity and responsible citizenship are constituents of education for all. Above all, the most important challenge is for people to learn to live together in peace, recognizing cultural diversity as a factor that fosters a more dynamic and resourceful society.

It is in this perspective that UNESCO and universities can be seen to share much in common. Our vision of the educational enterprise is similar, as is our valuation of learning as the foundation of individual, community and social development. Many of you here today -- whether as representatives of ministries of education, specific universities, higher education associations and federations, civil society organizations or international agencies -- are familiar with this close affinity between UNESCO and higher education.

In addition, I am sure you understand that when UNESCO reaffirms the centrality and priority of education for all in its work, as it has done during the recent strategic review, this implies no marginalization or neglect of higher education. Admittedly, we do not have the scale of resources we would like but we continue to see universities as key partners in all our fields of competence.

The question is, how can this partnership be deepened and further developed in particular relation to EFA? Earlier, I spoke of the pervasive influence of higher education on the rest of the education system. How, then, can this influence be heightened? How can it be directed strategically to where it can generate the greatest benefits? How can higher education institutions and networks interact more productively with other EFA partners? And how can universities and higher education systems themselves reap benefits from this engagement with the EFA challenge?

These are the kinds of questions that I hope you will address during the next two days. This meeting is an opportunity to share ideas but I hope it will also lead towards practical measures that will be sustained in the future. I do not expect that all of these actions will be channelled through UNESCO - as the global champion of EFA,

UNESCO wants the best for EFA whoever does it. For example, there are a number of EFA flagship programmes which UNESCO supports but is by no means in the lead.

If, of course, UNESCO does provide the framework for your enhanced involvement, I will not turn you away! You may be drawn towards our recently announced initiatives in three areas of work – literacy, teacher training in Sub-Saharan Africa and HIV/AIDS prevention education. Our new literacy initiative, for example, is aimed at reaching the excluded in society, especially women, in those countries with rates of illiteracy over 50% or with illiterate populations of ten million or more. This initiative, which is in the making, will be integrated into the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012) for which UNESCO is the international coordinator.

Our new initiative on teacher training in Sub-Saharan Africa is also in preparation but there is already considerable interest from potential beneficiary countries. We certainly hope that universities and higher education networks will support our efforts in this regard and I am sure that the Director of the Higher Education Division, Georges Haddad, who is leading this initiative, would be pleased to hear from you. The Global Initiative on HIV/AIDS Prevention Education will also focus strongly on the African continent but its reach will extend to other parts of the world where the rapid spread of this terrible disease is anticipated or already in motion.

In addition, allow me to draw your attention to a particular niche or priority concern of UNESCO, namely, the promotion of quality education at all levels but especially in EFA. This year's EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 is sub-titled "The Quality Imperative" and it looks set to be a major contribution to the ongoing debate. The next meeting of the EFA High-Level Group, which takes place in Brasilia in just a few days' time, will be informed by this monitoring report.

In recent years, UNESCO has been devoting many efforts to promoting the global debate on the quality of education. Part of this effort is directed towards linking quality with relevance. In this regard, it is pertinent that UNESCO is the lead agency for the forthcoming UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), in which there is already considerable interest coming from the higher education sector. My question, perhaps my challenge to those higher education institutions and networks interested in ESD is: how do you plan to bring benefits to basic education, adult literacy and lifelong learning, especially in order to enhance the quality of learning?

Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

These remarks are intended to whet your appetite for the real food for thought that is to come. I am very interested in how you will approach this whole question and how you see higher education playing an enhanced role in EFA in the years ahead. The EFA movement needs your partnership and your contributions. I am sure that your deliberations will be most insightful and thought-provoking, and I look forward to the outcomes of your discussions and exchanges with keen anticipation.

Thank you.