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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the Second Conference of Ministers of Education  
of the African Union

Algiers, 10 April 2005

Monsieur le Président Abdelaziz Bouteflika,  
Monsieur le Président Alpha Oumar Konaré,  
Mesdames et Messieurs les Ministres de l'éducation,  
Excellences Mesdames et Messieurs les Ambassadeurs et les Représentants des  
Organisations internationales  
Mesdames et Messieurs,

C'est un honneur et un plaisir de pouvoir m'adresser à vous aujourd'hui. C'est également une occasion heureuse de pouvoir célébrer le partenariat existant entre l'Union africaine, le NEPAD et les Ministres africains de l'éducation sur la question essentielle de l'éducation, aujourd'hui au cœur des stratégies de développement de ce continent.

Permettez-moi de commencer, Monsieur le Président, par vous exprimer, ainsi qu'à votre Gouvernement, mes félicitations les plus sincères pour l'organisation de cette conférence ici à Alger. Votre pays, point de rencontre entre le monde arabe et africain, est détenteur d'un riche passé historique et culturel qui lui donne un rôle privilégié pour aider à l'intégration et au développement du continent africain. Votre propre rôle, Monsieur le Président, pour orienter les politiques du NEPAD dans le sens d'un plus grand développement des ressources humaines, a été extrêmement important, et ne manquera pas d'avoir des effets à long terme. Puis-je ajouter que c'est un grand plaisir de vous rencontrer à nouveau, peu de temps après votre visite à Paris où vous avez bien voulu me rejoindre, aux côtés du Président Khatami, de la République islamique d'Iran, pour une rencontre sur le dialogue des cultures et des civilisations.

Permettez-moi également de rendre hommage au Président de la Commission de l'Union africaine, A. O. Konaré, qui a su apporter à cette importante fonction des qualités remarquables de vision, d'engagement et de talent politique. L'Afrique peut être fière d'avoir des dirigeants d'une telle qualité. Je sais qu'il est un ami de l'UNESCO et peux vous dire que cette amitié est partagée. Les objectifs, les valeurs et les priorités de l'UNESCO se retrouvent ainsi pleinement dans sa compréhension du rôle essentiel de la culture dans la paix et le développement, ainsi que dans sa reconnaissance du besoin de faire face au défi du développement durable par l'éducation. A cet égard, nous sommes très heureux qu'il ait accepté de faire partie du Groupe de haut niveau pour nous conseiller sur la Décennie des Nations Unies pour l'Education en vue du développement durable et qu'en dépit d'un agenda très chargé, il ait pu assister au lancement de la Décennie au Siège des Nations Unies à New York, le 1<sup>er</sup> mars dernier.

Enfin, je voudrais remercier le Président Konaré d'avoir bien voulu inviter l'UNESCO à contribuer à la préparation du Sommet de l'Union africaine, prévu en

janvier 2006, qui accordera une importance toute particulière aux thèmes de l'éducation et de la culture.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO is honoured to be joining Africa's Ministers of Education at this conference, which is only the second of its kind within the OAU/AU framework. The conference is being held at a timely and strategic moment when there is a real opportunity to give education a higher profile in Africa. In addition to the forthcoming AU Summit, there is the G-8 meeting in Scotland in July, chaired by the United Kingdom, whose Commission for Africa Report is an important contribution to the current development debate, not least in the area of education. This will be followed in September by the Millennium Summit + 5 meeting in New York, when progress towards fulfilling the international development agenda will come under the spotlight; at this event, both education and Africa are guaranteed to receive considerable attention. In late November, the fifth meeting of the High-Level Group on EFA will be held in Beijing, China, and, while literacy will be a special theme of this meeting and of the EFA Global Monitoring Report, all six EFA goals will be reviewed. Please note, by the way, that the EFA High-Level Group will return to the African continent in 2006, when Egypt will generously host this key EFA event.

It is my clear impression that Africa will be well-prepared for these important events and processes, particularly as a result of the work of the AU/ NEPAD and this particular ministerial conference. Recent years have witnessed a fresh engagement by Africa's leaders, at regional and sub-regional levels, with the development, peace and democracy agenda. Responsibility is being taken for ensuring African leadership of African development, and it has been recognized that this must rest upon African-led processes of strategy-making, policy generation and partnership-building.

I am proud that, under my stewardship, UNESCO has actively and constructively supported Africa in these important efforts and forged a strong link with the AU/NEPAD, especially in the area of human resource development and capacity-building.

We very much appreciate the decision to make education and culture the special theme of the AU Summit next January and to privilege UNESCO's participation in the preparation of this event. In addition to providing technical advice on this conference's main working document – "Quality Education for Africa's Sustainable Development" – UNESCO has generated a paper entitled "Education and Culture in Africa's Quest for Development", which explores the relationship between these two domains and argues that it is crucial in Africa's case for them to be brought closer together. I hope that you find the vision and analysis contained in this paper to be

relevant to your needs and concerns. We are grateful to President Konaré and the AU Commission for agreeing to this UNESCO contribution being considered by you, the African Ministers of Education, and by your colleagues, the Ministers of Culture, with a view to preparing the AU Summit.

Africa is a priority for UNESCO and the strengthening of African integration is one important dimension of this commitment. This applies at the regional level, as our engagement with the AU testifies, and also at the sub-regional level. In this regard, many of you will recall that UNESCO organized meetings with the respective Ministers of Education of ECOWAS, CEMAC and the Portuguese-speaking countries early last year. We are convinced that regional and sub-regional mechanisms of integration are vital not only for supporting national education efforts such as Education for All (EFA) but also for devising ways to promote and facilitate cooperation among African states in the field of education.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This prioritization of Africa and its educational situation corresponds to the perception that, generally speaking, Africa's education is lagging behind the rest of the world and, as a result, its education systems require urgent attention. Without sustained extra efforts, neither the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) nor the Education for All goals will be reached by 2015 in many African countries – this, please note, is not a prediction but a warning. Major advances in education are essential for enabling Africa to truly realize its enormous potential and to make the African Renaissance a lived reality for Africa's peoples.

The African Union and its programme, the NEPAD, have recognized what is at stake and what needs to be done. Recent publications are in clear agreement – including the Millennium Project Report, the Commission for Africa Report and UNESCO's own EFA Global Monitoring Report, as well as the Regional African EFA Review, the Executive Summary of which has been circulated here in draft form for your information. Reaching the three measurable Dakar goals of achieving universal primary education, attaining gender equality and reducing illiteracy rates by half by 2015 will be difficult for a number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. These countries need to do more themselves but they also need more help from the international community in order to do so. This is a message that I repeat tirelessly wherever I go.

At the International Literacy Day celebrations last September, I asked: “how can we build equitable information societies or thriving democracies if so many remain without the basic tools of literacy? How can intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding prosper when the literacy divide is so great? And how can poverty be

eradicated when the roots of ignorance are left undisturbed”? Today, I add the following question: how can Africa claim its rightful place in the global economy and bridge the digital divide when a considerable proportion of its human resources is not decisively engaged in meeting the development challenge because of lack of education, under-nourishment, ill-health and poverty?

As in the case of every other continent before now, the development of Africa must begin with the development of its human resources; consequently, African countries must invest in their education systems so that children, youth and adults receive the best possible education and training. At the beginning of this new century, knowledge is becoming the engine of the global economy and the shaper of society. In these circumstances, spending on literacy and basic education should be conceived not as a ‘cost’ but as an investment. But, in the meantime, trouble continues to be stored up for the future - of the 104 million school-age children who are out of school, 42 percent are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

As the lead coordinator of the global EFA movement, UNESCO firmly believes that basic education of good quality is the foundation of all development. Please note that emphasis on quality – EFA is not just about access and continuity of schooling but also about effective learning and the content of learning. This is why we are so interested in the education/culture nexus because it points to how African education may be revitalized through its content and through its re-connection with society, culture and community. At the same time, it must draw upon newly emerging knowledge and the best educational practices available in the world.

As Ministers of Education, you are under many pressures, each of which is always more important and more urgent than all the others. Naturally, I hope you will give pride of place to the needs of basic education but without neglecting the importance of other types and levels of education. After all, success in universal primary education will soon translate into new challenges at the secondary level, and the expansion of quality education needs the assistance of higher education, not least for the flow of graduates who will be the source of tomorrow’s qualified teachers.

UNESCO is not a wealthy organization and we, too, must make difficult choices when faced with finite resources and competing demands. This is why we have looked at where our best strategic advantage lies, especially in relation to the EFA challenge. In addition to an overall concern for advancing quality, UNESCO is planning to place particular emphasis on three programmatic areas that will receive sustained attention over the next ten years: literacy; teacher training in Sub-Saharan Africa; and HIV/AIDS and education. We are developing three initiatives that correspond to these areas, which are particularly crucial for many African countries. Let me assure you that we are in a listening mode. The initiatives will need to be carefully adapted to specific country conditions and requirements.

It was almost exactly five years ago that the World Education Forum was held in Dakar, Senegal. Despite considerable progress in many countries, we continue to face tremendous challenges in achieving EFA. But these challenges are not insurmountable, providing that national energies are mobilized and the international community provides more of its promised support, sustained over a longer period of time.

I am convinced that the success of EFA depends upon it becoming a truly national movement, rooted in society's needs, responsive to society's demands, anchored in local realities and harnessing all key sources of national energy – government, civil society, the private sector, communities, universities and individuals. In order to be authentic and sustainable, this national movement needs to be grounded upon a strong consensus that education is **the** national priority. This consensus must be cultivated so that it cuts across all political, social and other divisions.

Thus, the self-determination of African countries requires them to do more, much more, to expand and improve their education systems. And this will send a strong signal to the international community. And, as I again say, the international community must get behind these national efforts and help them to succeed.

Frankly, I am heartened by the expectation that a second Decade of Education for Africa will be called for. This tells me that Africa is gearing itself up to address its educational challenges with renewed purpose and greater determination. In this effort, you can be assured of UNESCO's support and solidarity.

It remains for me to thank President Bouteflika and President Konare once again for this opportunity to address you. I wish you every success in your important deliberations.

Thank you for your kind attention.