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Subject: Enhancing the capacities of National Commissions for UNESCO

Sir/Madam,

In a circular letter of 29 August 2001 (CL/3599), I drew the attention of Member States to the importance of the network of National Commissions for UNESCO, which is unique within the United Nations system and an invaluable asset for the Organization, notably in ensuring the impact of its activities at country level.

In particular, I emphasized that National Commissions require solid capacities in order to realize their optimal potential, especially in the context of the decentralization process where they are considered to play a significant role. I also stressed that, under the terms of the Charter of National Commissions, UNESCO and its Member States have a shared responsibility for enhancing the capacities of these bodies.

It is important to note that, in the course of the present biennium, UNESCO, continuing to discharge its full responsibility in this respect, will have invested some US \$3 million from the regular programme (both planned activities and the Participation Programme) in capacity-building for National Commissions. Already, some 600 staff members of National Commissions have taken part in or have benefited from this training. The results to date will undoubtedly help National Commissions to assume a more proactive and catalytic role in ensuring the impact of UNESCO's programme as the Medium-Term Strategy advances.

However, while I consider that UNESCO has made significant progress in modernizing the training and competences required to secure a network of innovative and dynamic National Commissions, I am conscious that much remains to be done. It is clear that, given the advance of the decentralization process and the significance of a strong presence for UNESCO in our Member States, capacity-building for National Commissions must be reinforced still further.

I cannot over emphasize the importance I attach to your close collaboration in this crucial endeavour. UNESCO depends on its Member States to ensure that each National Commission has a solid staffing and resource base. Secretaries-General should serve for a minimum term of three to four years, spanning at least two programme and budget cycles, to ensure continuity in managing the complex issues addressed in UNESCO's programmes. The provision of adequate professional and support staff is also vital, which is why UNESCO has invested considerable resources in their training. Above all, National Commissions must enjoy high status in the administrative structures of Member States so as to ensure the solid and effective coordination amongst ministries which is

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necessary to follow UNESCO's increasingly intersectoral programme and to stimulate outreach to partners in civil society.

I therefore call upon you, as the Ministers responsible for relations with UNESCO, to give your full support to the National Commissions by addressing these crucial issues. As you are aware, the Task Force on UNESCO in the 21st Century made a number of important proposals to enhance the role of the National Commission network. UNESCO's capacity-building strategy has proved to be a sound beginning. Now, we must go further with your guidance and direct involvement to enable National Commissions to play their full role during the coming biennium, as UNESCO advances in the implementation of its Medium-Term Strategy.

Accept, Sir/Madam, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Koïchiro Matsuura
Director-General

cc: National Commissions for UNESCO
Permanent Delegations to UNESCO