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**Launch of UNESCO's Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

"The Right to Education"

Camilla Croso, December 2007

Mr. Director General Koichiro Matsuura, Mr. Michel Doucin, Mr. Bacre Ndiaye, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to speak to you all on the right to education, at this important conference that marks the launch of UNESCO's activities related to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Declaration was proclaimed in a post-war context whence it was recognized that the "disregard and contempt for human rights resulted in barbarous acts which outraged the conscience of mankind". Ever since 1948, the Declaration has been the key reference point to all of those engaged in recognizing the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all human beings and in fostering freedom, justice and peace in the world.

In terms of Education, the Declaration is clear: its Article 26 states that everyone has a right to education, that education shall be free and that it shall be compulsory. But not only does the Declaration touch upon the access to education, it also pinpoints the very significance education should have, shedding important light in terms of the desired quality. It says: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

Sixty years later, these challenges are still to be met.

The Declaration not only is a mark in the promotion of education as a human right, it is also a milestone in recognizing the key role of education in the

promotion of all other human rights. It is no coincidence that on December 10th 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations called upon all Member countries to publicize the Declaration, disseminate and read it principally in schools and other educational institutions. Furthermore, in its Preamble, it states that “every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms”.

This is yet another challenge to be face up to: the promotion of human rights *through* education.

Undoubtedly, much progress has occurred in the last six decades and many more children, youth and adults are able to benefit and fulfil their right to education. There has been growing debate, involvement, development of legally binding international charters, declarations and protocols that place education as a human right. There has also been growing mobilization of the international community, particularly through the Education for All conferences at Jomtien, in 1990, and Dakar, in 2000, led by UNESCO. Similarly, civil society has become more and more active in advocating and demanding the right to education. Nevertheless the challenges are still immense.

The latest Education for All Global Monitoring Report estimates that 72 million children are still out of school and that 774 million adults lack basic literacy skills, two thirds being women. The Dakar gender parity goal has been missed by most countries: only one-third reported parity in both primary and secondary education. Gender equality is even more distant, where in-school stereotypes persist, along with unsafe environments and sexual violence. There is a gap of 18 million teachers in primary education and urgent need to provide dignified working conditions to those professionals currently in schools. Growing inequalities prevent many children from attending schools, particularly considering the rural environment, racial and ethnic characteristics and family income, to name but a few.

Many others live in extremely vulnerable conditions. Millions of migrants and refugees find many of their rights violated, including their right to education.

Denying education to this population goes against the universal nature of the human rights and must be challenged upfront.

For all children, youth and adults, education must be meaningful, must foster fulfilling learning experiences that relate to how, as citizens, we interact and intervene in our common world. In other words, that relate to that which think, say and do. Bringing to the forefront the notion of a common world, which at the same time is plural and diverse, is crucial to build on the importance of a citizenship which is respectful of human dignity, diversity and peace. This relates to the quality education we envisage. The above mentioned EFA report concludes that poor quality education is undermining all other Education for All goals.

Defending the notion of education as a right, and the State as responsible for its guarantee, is another key challenge we increasingly face. In many contexts education is being reduced to merchandise, to a service that is prone to being commercialised at national, regional and international levels. Within the General Agreement of Trade and Services of the World Trade Organization and other regional and bilateral trade agreements, education is one of the many so-called services being offered. In fact, the education sector is announced as one of the most profitable. Within this framework, education is a business; students are clients and teachers, employees. This is thus a key issue for all human rights activists, whereby the human-rights perspective of education launched by the Universal Declaration in 1948 is at risk.

It is worthy of note that different forms of schools fees are charged in public schools in more than 70 countries, resulting in millions of children not being able to attend. If education is to be for all, it must be compulsory and in order for it to be compulsory it must be free. The principle of compulsory and free education is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reiterated in the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), in the Protocol of San Salvador to the American Convention on Human Rights (1988), in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child (1990).

As we can see, the challenges are numerous, statistics and realities still shocking. It is imperative to maintain this sense of awareness in order to sharpen our judgement of the extent to which such figures and realities are unacceptable but also to foster in us all a sense of urgency towards action and change, with the knowledge that the challenges are not insurmountable.

In this sense, some points deserve special attention:

First and foremost, it is crucial to continue a proactive defence of a rights-based approach towards education, placing at the centre of the agenda the need for free and compulsory education for all. Fostering a rights-based framework implies activating justiciability mechanisms, based on national as well as international systems of justice, whenever the right to education is violated. For this to be effective, civil society must be aware of its rights and informed as to how to proceed in case of violations.

Education for all necessarily implies overcoming the abysmal inequalities in school access and attendance for the many disadvantaged groups who have their right to education violated. To tackle this, equity policies must be developed at country level, which recognise and seek to repair such inequalities. Such affirmative action will allow the education system further leeway to contribute towards interrupting the maintenance and reproduction of inequalities, thus leveraging broader social change.

And *free education* necessarily implies prioritizing education in the public and political agenda. This includes guaranteeing adequate State investment for the sector, which in turn implies revising overall government budgets. More effective use of resources is also crucial, and to this end, mechanisms of budget control must be put in place.

As already mentioned, the call for action now goes beyond free and compulsory education for all, to include *quality* free and compulsory education for all. The right to education is integral and if education lacks quality, the right is not being implemented. Our attempts to guarantee that all can have access to schools increases our responsibility in also guaranteeing that the education offered is of

quality. It must be a commitment towards all those attending educational institutions.

Free quality education for all is not a single-sector challenge. Public policies oriented towards broader social and economic development have intimate relation with creating the necessary conditions that effectively enable children, youth and adults to participate and learn in the education system. For this reason, a multi sector approach is crucial.

The challenges here pointed out will be more effectively tackled with an active civil society participation in policy making, monitoring and evaluation. Guaranteeing public debate involving civil society and particularly the educational community (teachers, students and parents) will give policy further legitimacy and, consequently, sustainability. A long term horizon in the education sector is fundamental and in this sense, we must work for education to be tackled not as a government policy, but as a long-term State policy.

UNESCO has carried out a strategic role in the past decades in the effective implementation of the right to education and has enormous potential to continue to do so. The two EFA World Education Forums it led in 1990 and 2000, for example, mobilized over 150 countries around common goals and increased the international pressure so that States met their obligations in implementing the right to education.

A further step may be taken along this line, leading or supporting strategies that articulate legally binding instruments within the education sector. Giving centrality to such justiciability approaches will greatly strengthen a human-rights perspective towards education and increase effectiveness in tackling the numerous challenges.

Strengthening the human-rights framework in education, fostering debates and initiatives that give clearer outlines to what is understood by *quality* education and helping to reposition education in the public agenda, in such a way that it may gain political priority at the national level, are some of the crucial contributions UNESCO can offer in the current scenario.

Thank you for your attention.