



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO,**

**at the opening meeting of the
Permanent Forum of Arab-African Forum
Dialogue on Democracy and Human Rights**

“Migration in the Arab-African Region”

**Headquarters of the League of Arab States,
Cairo, Egypt, 7 December 2009**

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege for me to open today the first meeting of the Permanent Forum of Arab-African Forum Dialogue on Democracy and Human Rights, with emphasis on migration in the Arab-African region.

Allow me first to convey to you the joy that I feel at being here in Egypt, one of the founders of UNESCO and a friend to the Organization for more than 60 years. My visit here actually began two days ago with a long discussion with President Hosni Mubarak, with whom I had valuable exchanges on developments in this region of the world and on the role played here by UNESCO.

I wish to express heartfelt thanks to Mrs Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of Egypt, who has kindly sponsored this Forum, and to Mr Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States. I should also like to extend greetings, most respectfully, to Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, President of the National Council for Human Rights of Egypt and Vice-President of the Forum, who, in 1996, when Secretary-General of the United Nations, launched the Agenda for Democratization, a key document and a source of inspiration to this day. Mr Boutros-Ghali also chaired in 2003, at the invitation of UNESCO, the International Panel on Democracy and Development, which recognized, in particular, that the sustainability of equitable development was closely bound up with democracy. Lastly, I should like to extend the warmest greetings to Mr Abdou Diouf, Secretary-General of the Organization of the

Francophonie and Honorary President of the Forum, a model democrat and stalwart champion of cultural diversity.

Less than one month ago, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was an historic event of great symbolic significance for world peace and democracy. It marked the beginning of a worldwide aspiration to democracy, prosperity and a better life. The effects of that change can still be felt today, as I can myself attest, since I come from a country that experienced that profound democratic transition.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, globalization has taken off, transforming the international landscape. It has certainly speeded up economic growth, intensified relations among countries and given rise to very valuable ties of mutual respect and understanding. However, in some sectors, globalization has aggravated injustice in the world, in addition to inequalities, such as those apparent in the context of the crisis which has persisted for two years now. This is a global crisis in economic, financial, social and environmental terms. Yet it is also a moral and ethical crisis, threatening the implementation of the most important agenda of present-day multilateralism, namely the Millennium Development Goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The various forms of migration are age-old phenomena dating back, very probably, to the dawn of humanity, when our common ancestors left their territory for more hospitable lands, for forests better stocked with game or milder climes. The nature of migration became more complex over time, as world population grew. Flight from oppression and war and the quest for a safer and more prosperous environment have played a part in increasing migratory flows. And now, in our contemporary world, migration is rising exponentially and is close to paroxysm. We all know that it must be anticipated and humanized.

In the long course of history, cultures have always intermingled, colouring and enriching one another. Migration has contributed, often most fruitfully, to syncretism and fusion. Our past is dotted with splendid examples of such pollination due to migration, but it is often only with the passage of time that we see the rewards, a posteriori. Today's problems, however, are very direct and very urgent: we must recognize the deep-seated significance of forced migration, conducted in emergency circumstances, often on a large scale, the outcome of dysfunctions, cataclysms or unbearable injustice. We are all aware of the famines, epidemics,

conflicts, natural disasters, human rights violations and violence that trigger many instances of migration. Stepping back to put matters in perspective, as if we were observers of our own planet Earth, we see at once that humanity shares, yet does not own, a world in the throes of a crisis to which our fate is bound. North, South, East, West, we are all on the same planet, weakened geophysically, environmentally and in terms of humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of migration, selected for our first meeting, is so closely linked to world issues that I must share with you the major policy directions adopted by UNESCO today in order to give fresh impetus to solidarity, in order to bring people together and awaken their conscience.

The touchstone of our ethics is our attitude to the vulnerability and glaring inequalities that erode the Earth. This moral sense and resolute attitude are the central planks of the new humanism that I advocate and place at the heart of UNESCO's reflection and action. To my mind, humanism is an aspiration to peace, democracy, justice and human rights; it is an aspiration to tolerance, to knowledge and to the diversity of cultures. It is rooted in social and economic responsibility. It is embodied in assistance for the most vulnerable. It is central to our commitment to take up major common challenges. Migration flows today and in the near future, and those that will be brought about by climate change, are among these major common challenges because they impinge directly on the basic rights of migrating population groups.

According to the World Human Development Report published in 2009 by the United Nations Development Programme, with emphasis on human mobility and development, "being able to decide where to live is a key element of human freedom", but also "when people move they embark on a journey of hope and uncertainty". Now, the current phenomenon of migration magnifies, as under a magnifying glass, the overall problems of human society: all stumbling blocks are exacerbated in migration processes, especially in forced migration. It is therefore absolutely necessary to acquire the material resources required to receive and cater for others, it is necessary to make pragmatic preparations for the migrants' new life and it is necessary to recognize diversity as an asset. For migrants are not a source of disturbance but of enrichment. Moreover, migration effected under

decent conditions is known to be beneficial both to the migrants and to society as a whole.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Under the multidisciplinary approach enabled by its programmes, UNESCO gives pride of place to the holistic resolution of the closely inter-linked problems raised by migration. How can migrants genuinely be assisted except by giving them access to knowledge? How can migrants be integrated except by recognizing their basic rights and full citizenship? How can migrants be respected except by presenting their culture, traditions and language in a favourable light?

UNESCO's unique strength lies in its capacity to advise and assist countries to act on all of these fronts in an integrated manner, owing to its mandate and its expertise in education, science, culture and communication, which are inseparable fields. UNESCO aims to be effective at three levels: first, upstream, in the front-line struggle against the serious causes of migration, such as problems arising from economic backwardness and climate change, by means of its scientific expertise. Secondly, UNESCO wishes to take action to ensure that effective migration is successful by promoting, through basic education and education for human rights, the observance of basic rights and the strengthening of social cohesion and by combating identity-mediated withdrawal, racism, prejudice and inequality. Thirdly, drawing on multilateralism, UNESCO will breathe new life into dialogue among cultures and will increase the assistance that it provides to States in order to preserve and enhance cultural diversity in its constantly changing forms.

In 2010, the celebration of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, for which our Organization has leadership in the United Nations system, will be an opportunity to establish multiple partnerships around UNESCO, in particular, with this Permanent Forum of Arab-African Dialogue, to highlight the links among cultures and build up the dialogue between them. I also intend to establish a high panel on peace and dialogue among cultures in furtherance of reflection on culture, tolerance, reconciliation and balance within our own societies and throughout the world. Of course, the issue of migrations and their impact will be one of the topics discussed by the high panel.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Peace is a polysemous word that applies just as well to understanding between migrants and the receiving community, to harmony between human beings and their environment, and to relations among peoples. Peace is UNESCO's primary goal and, for that reason, I commend all efforts that have led to the holding of this Forum, a genuine initiative for meeting and dialogue, reflecting the determination to defuse conflicts and to find lasting solutions based on the interest of every man, woman and child. I also commend the recent establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean, co-chaired by President Hosni Mubarak, which has been set the task of contributing to the development of the region and laying the foundations for its inhabitants' prosperity.

Africa and the Arab world have ties of brotherhood. They are two geographically close regions, two mutually familiar areas, in the mosaic pattern of the universal. They honour each other today, through the existence of this standing forum for dialogue, by continuing to take charge of their future and to enquire into the conditions under which democracy and human rights can foster the well-being of the communities that live on African and Arab soil.

Democracy and human rights are fields of action that are fundamental for UNESCO. Peace is written in the ink of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Erecting the defences of peace, as urged by the Constitution of UNESCO, is primarily a matter of consolidating the values of democracy and ensuring unfailing respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. This mission is more relevant than ever, as constant watch must be kept over all that has been achieved in regard to democracy and human rights.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Population movement is now a matter of concern to all countries, be they countries of origin, transit countries or host countries. The number of people living outside their country of origin has doubled in the last 50 years. Nearly half of all migrants are now women. These are major trends that are reworking the fabric of our societies. In regard to these major issues of our time, UNESCO is under a duty to speak to the world; it has the capacity to make its voice heard and to position itself in order to tackle the most urgent needs, such as those relating to Africa and gender equality which are our Organization's two basic priorities. UNESCO totally

supports African countries in their quest for solutions to the major challenges today and is fully involved in the struggle for gender equality, which is a basic human right. As the first woman Director-General of UNESCO, I wish to pay tribute, too, to Mrs Mubarak whom I met shortly after my arrival in Egypt. In discussing many matters, we took stock of the great efforts that she has been making for many years now to give women and girls their rightful place in society.

If we wish for more on the human level, let us make more room for the human dimension. If we desire more equity, let us adopt laws to ensure greater equity. If we want more peace, let us do what is necessary, through strong political will, to establish peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In coming to Cairo, a city that embodies the wealth of the intermingling and diversity of cultures, and in opening this Forum, I wish to signify by my presence UNESCO's determination to strengthen the close ties that bind it to the Arab-African region.

I thank you for your attention and I wish you every success in your work.