

**Conférence générale**

32e session  
Document d'information

**Генеральная конференция**

32-я сессия  
Информационный документ

**inf**

Paris 2003

**General Conference**

32nd session  
Information document

**المؤتمر العام**

الدورة الثانية والثلاثون  
وثيقة إعلامية

**Conferencia General**

32ª reunión  
Documento de información

大会  
第三十二届会议  
资料性文件

32 C/INF.15  
11 October 2003  
Original: English

Item 5.19 of the agenda

**NEW PERSPECTIVES IN UNESCO'S ACTIVITIES PERTAINING  
TO THE DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS AND CULTURES, INCLUDING  
IN PARTICULAR FOLLOW-UP OF THE NEW DELHI MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE**

**Information document by the Director-General**

The present information note provides complementary information to assist the General Conference in its deliberations of the item. The note contains a summary of the salient points presented by the Bureau of Strategic Planning in background documents prepared for the New Delhi Conference and the Ohrid Forum, focusing on possible action in UNESCO's domains.

**SUMMARY OF THE SALIENT POINTS PRESENTED  
IN BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS PREPARED FOR  
THE NEW DELHI INTERNATIONAL MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE  
AND THE OHRID REGIONAL FORUM**

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The concept of a “Dialogue among Civilizations” has assumed even greater salience in the face of new and multidimensional threats to global peace and security. In past years and especially so since the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the activities promoting a dialogue among civilizations have attracted renewed attention at the highest political levels throughout the world. Coinciding with the adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 21 November 2001: Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations – capping the global observance of 2001 as United Nations Year for the Dialogue among Civilizations –, UNESCO has intensified its own activities in this area. It has received new impetus through 31 C/Resolution 39 on the fight against terrorism adopted by the General Conference at its 31st session in November 2001. The challenge today is to move beyond general agreement about the value of, or the need for, dialogue or beyond historical analysis, to concrete approaches and activities. How, in the context of globalization, can dialogue become a tool to bolster peace and security and to advance sustainable development? New and multidimensional challenges abound and demand innovative modalities, which allow for common reflection and commitments.

2. The United Nations Action Plan for the Dialogue among Civilizations emphasized the necessity of defining “civilization” as a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon, for the simple – yet often neglected – reason that civilizations have always been enriched by contact and exchange with other civilizations, hence always involved in a dynamic process of change and redefinition of “self”. Civilizations are inherently “intercultural”. Cultural monologues or cultural fundamentalism, which freeze “the other” as an alien, and as such a potential enemy, run counter to this constitutive feature of human civilization and social organization. Many of the problems faced by today’s world have arisen as a consequence of differences *within* nations. Dialogue therefore must begin at home. While globalization is creating new opportunities for cultural exchange, conflicts arising within nation states have turned out to often involve cultural matters. The Action Plan explicitly stressed that the manner in which diversity is defined and acted upon by governments and civil society determines whether it is to lead to greater overall social creativity, cohesion and inclusion – or to violence and exclusion. As the General Conference stated in 31 C/Resolution 39, efforts will need to be redoubled, not only to strengthen the knowledge and understanding of the world’s diversity of cultures, but also to reinforce our capacity to accept and accommodate the different “other” and accommodate “the other” in an overall desire to live together.

## **UNESCO’S ROLE AND ACTIVITIES**

3. Dialogue in the present global circumstances needs to address a complex range of sociopolitical issues and parameters, cutting across all fields of competence of UNESCO – education, the sciences, culture and communication – and all regions and cultures. But it must be recognized that the dialogue among cultures and civilizations not only concerns the intellectual and cultural spheres, but has equally a profoundly political dimension.

4. Promoting dialogue among civilizations and cultures has become a key component of UNESCO’s mission and activities. The Organization’s Constitution provides that peace must be founded “upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind”, and that UNESCO has been

created “for the purpose of advancing, through the educational and scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world, the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind for which the United Nations Organization was established and which its Charter proclaims”. UNESCO has pursued the concept of a Dialogue among Civilizations since its inception. India was host to UNESCO’s 9th session of the General Conference in New Delhi in 1956, where the historic precursor to the Dialogue among Civilizations, UNESCO’s “Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values,” was launched.

5. It should also be borne in mind that the Organization was designated by the United Nations General Assembly as lead agency for the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010), a role which it has likewise fulfilled for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004). Overall, this has enabled UNESCO to design numerous and innovative activities at regional, national and local levels.

6. In UNESCO’s Medium-Term Strategy for 2002-2007 (31 C/4), the dialogue among civilizations has been designated as one of only 12 strategic objectives for the Organization, within the programme for culture, and intercultural dialogue has been an important main line of action in Major Programme IV (Culture) both in documents 31 C/5 and 32 C/5. Reference to the pivotal role of the dialogue among civilizations is also well anchored in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by UNESCO’s General Conference on 2 November 2001.

7. In the past, the Organization has sought to strengthen the processes, both historical and contemporary, that are conducive to a favourable interaction, mutual understanding and even convergence between a wide range of cultures through the discovery of a common heritage and shared ethical values. By analysing the dynamics of interaction between cultures and highlighting their mutual contributions, borrowings and interactions, the aim was to acquire a better understanding of the long-term processes that are the mainspring of the memory of peoples. Yet, cultures and civilizations are not immutable, they continuously redefine themselves through new interactions. They are invariably the source of prejudice and incomprehension, if not tolerance, of others and yet, almost paradoxically, they lay the foundations for a dialogue between different civilizations, cultures, religions and spiritual traditions.

8. More recently, UNESCO has sought to broaden the scope of the dialogue and to make it more relevant to contemporary challenges by reviewing and assessing the concept and past approaches, identifying and overcoming obstacles to dialogue, including new and old ignorances and prejudices, potentially leading to new fractures and conflicts, especially at local and community levels. The challenge is to chart novel approaches to dialogue beyond established frameworks, also drawing on information and communication technologies (ICTs) so as to reach out to often excluded segments of society. Different dimensions must be included, drawing also on belief systems, cultural parameters, scientific expertise, civil society resources, such as parliamentarians, and especially young people. The overall challenge is to move beyond the stage of general agreement and statements of intent in relation to the dialogue, and to seek new responses using the vectors of ethical and spiritual values, education, science and technology and cultural diversity and heritage with a view to constructing a framework for global dialogue in the twenty-first century.

## **VALUES – AT THE CORE OF A DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS**

9. Certain values and principles are universally shared and cut across all civilizations and establish a sense of community among them. Tolerance is a principle that transcends civilizational differences. Any dialogue must therefore focus on the importance of shared values, which give meaning to life and provide form and substance to identities. It must also foster tolerance and

respect for the other and acknowledge and uphold diversity. In all efforts, it is necessary to promote a constantly renewed awareness of the ethical principles, values and attitudes that lay at its very foundation. Respect for all human rights, inclusiveness, and the search for unity in diversity need to be constantly reinforced in the light of the major social and economic transformations induced by globalization. Furthermore, ethical values are essential in developing sound international policies and contributing to the creation of norms and structures that are conducive to a more peaceful and just society.

10. As such, dialogue nurtures a common base for human existence rooted in history, heritage and tradition. But how can one best build and sustain such a base, in which all people should be enabled to participate with equal dignity and mutual respect – especially under conditions of globalization? Future international efforts will arguably require a reinforced commitment to a dialogue between different faiths, cultures and civilizations in the search for an authentic and shared universality.

## **EDUCATION – THE PRECONDITION AND PIVOT**

11. There is a growing realization that survival of humankind depends also upon forging a unified perspective transcending historically evolved perspectives of religion, ethnicity, ideology, etc., and at the same time showing due respect to the past and drawing inspiration from such differences. Education is a unique instrumentality and process to help forge such unity in the midst of differences and to ensure sustained and continuous dialogue. The Delors Report, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (1996), spelled out that education can only promote social cohesion if it strives to take the diversity of individuals and groups into consideration, while at the same time seeking to construct universally accepted philosophies and policies of education.

12. Thus, education can help the world's population to develop and conduct a long-term dialogue between cultures and civilizations as well as to ensure the participation of all in such dialogue. Indeed, education at all levels – through formal, non-formal and informal approaches – has an inherent ability to release the potential of dialogue, provided it is accessible to all. The development of rights-based and values-oriented national approaches will be at the heart of educational efforts.

13. The necessity to develop quality education is paramount. As was emphasized also at the recent Round Table of Ministers held in the context of the General Conference, the notion of quality education does not merely encompass aspects of educational attainment, but especially so the aspects of curricula and their content focusing on peace, shared values, human rights, democracy, tolerance and mutual understanding. Educational institutions and educational materials are uniquely able to serve as a vehicle for peace, dialogue and intercultural understanding, but should not be instrumentalized for and used as vehicles to spread misunderstanding, intolerance and hate.

14. Quality education for peace and security should focus in particular on:

- improving knowledge of cultures, civilizations, religions and traditions;
- developing an understanding of universally shared values;
- encouraging the development of key competencies for peace and the prevention and resolution of conflict.

15. Education ought to be of such a quality that it is capable of fostering the establishment of a positive identity based on respect for the self and for others. One key modality for quality education is the improvement and revision of textbooks and teaching materials and the training of teachers. Revisions should aim to provide impartial, dispassionate and comprehensive knowledge about

cultures and civilizations, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations, and promote the necessary forums for research and dialogue among concerned specialists (history, religion, literature, sociology, etc.). Moreover, focus on human rights education and civic education are essential, especially in post-conflict situations, where the process of textbook revision and educational reform is a key element of reconstruction and reconciliation processes and where it can encourage students belonging to different communities to develop a new sense of shared destiny. For its part, human rights education should not only impart knowledge about rights but should also be directed to related practice and capacities (“learning for human rights”) and promote a learning environment conducive to peace and dialogue.

16. Education’s central contribution to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity is undeniable. Thus, educational programmes should not focus on differences, but rather on the ways in which diversity can enrich lives and on “learning to live together” – the fourth pillar of education for the twenty-first century identified in the Delors Report. This may also include improving dialogue with marginalized groups and promoting tolerance and conflict-resolution programmes in schools, which could be furthered through cooperation with civil society organizations already working on good practices for conflict-resolution. Dialogue nurtured within the minds of human beings through appropriate education can inform and shape overt dialogues among individuals and among groups brought up in different cultural environments leading towards new harmonious existence capable of defining and meeting mutual interests.

17. The universal – political – commitment to the six goals of Education for All (EFA) adopted in Dakar in April 2000 has created a particularly powerful base for a range of initiatives and approaches, among others to attain universal primary education by 2015 and gender parity in schooling by 2005. At the national level, a systematic incorporation of dialogue approaches necessitates substantial educational reforms. Purposes and goals of national education policies may need to be revised, curricula, textbooks, school and teaching learning materials reviewed and revised, the precepts of sustainable development promoted, appreciation for and the practice of democratic values, human rights, pluralism and non-violence taught, all complemented and enriched through the use of ICTs. Strategies to educate new generations of teachers and a reorientation and education of serving teachers must complement this agenda. The inevitably long-term processes of human rights education and conflict resolution point to the necessity to extend these actions to lifelong education, which encourages learning beyond formal education, in informal and non-formal settings.

18. It may be of value to share the experiences of educational reforms by different groups and nations interested in the promotion of peace, prosperity and dignity of human beings. The benefits will be in the form of collaborative and concerted efforts to resolve differences, support each other in elimination of poverty and ignorance and secure dignity with prosperity of humanity.

## **SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY – A NEGLECTED PILLAR FOR THE PROMOTION OF DIALOGUE**

19. Knowledge and its application in science and technology has always been a key component of development for all cultures and civilizations – yet its potential to advance and inspire dialogue has often been neglected. However, in a period of accelerating globalization, the generation and application of the sciences and technology and scientific and technological interchange, sharing and networking have become increasingly vital for economic and social development. Policies to address contemporary challenges increasingly demand scientific advice based on analysis, understanding, sharing and anticipation. More than ever, decision-making and policy formulation require understanding of the scientific underpinnings and consequences must be fully informed as

to their scientific basis and consequences, drawing on input both from the natural sciences and the social and human sciences.

20. Many countries lack the human, institutional and technical capacities to fully participate in the building of knowledge societies, and this at a moment when the digital divide also accentuates disparities in development, excluding entire groups and countries from the potential benefits of new opportunities. Science and technology can promote intercultural exchange and dialogue, create bridges and networks which link people, knowledge, and societies more closely together. Science and technology must increasingly be recognized as central components of knowledge systems and cultures around the world. In pursuing this path, the recognition of ethical standards and principles that should guide scientific and technological advances must be explicitly addressed.

21. Science and technology have been defining aspects of all civilizations. Indeed, without science and technology, no civilization could have evolved. The speed of scientific and technological progress poses nowadays new challenges. On the one hand, there has been an enormous increase in the understanding of nature in all its aspects; and on the other, tremendous opportunities keep opening up for the application of this knowledge in diverse areas of human needs, relating to food security, water resources, health, sustainable development, energy and much else. Likewise, the advances in life sciences are having a profound and revolutionary impact and are posing questions as profound as the origin and meaning of life.

22. The advances in information and communication technologies add a new dimension to this complex picture. They have an unprecedented ability to bring together diverse communities, cultures and civilizations; yet many countries and individuals still lack the capacity to participate in the construction of knowledge societies. The new dialogue among cultures and civilizations must come to terms with this reality.

23. Despite rapid technological transformation in these fields and the ICT-induced shrinking of physical distances between the different parts of a world without frontiers, the world community is experiencing an intensive feeling of economic, social and cultural insecurities. There is also a wide disparity, if not a multiple divide between different parts of the world and different strata of society, including with respect of access to the knowledge base that exists and which is growing rapidly.

24. Persistence of acute poverty and destitution among large segments of the world's population, large and growing sections of excluded and deprived, including women, absence of social empowerment, lack of basic needs of life in large parts of the world, an ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor, both within and across the nations – topped by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Dialogue among the proponents of different perceptions and models of development in a framework of mutual understanding and respect needs to be encouraged.

25. The potential to harness resources to positive or negative effect is considerable. UNESCO is the only agency of the United Nations system to combine in its mandate education, natural science, social science, culture and communication, all disciplines which are essential to the understanding of the ethical dilemmas inherent in science and technology today. Hence the necessity of establishing a mechanism for dialogue and coordinating issues of growing ethical concern. Bioethical issues, by their very nature, must be dealt with at the international level. For its part, the UNESCO World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology agreed in 1999 that “all scientists should commit themselves to high ethical standards and a code of ethics based on relevant norms enshrined in international human rights instruments”. It goes on to state that “the social responsibility of scientists requires that they maintain high standards of scientific integrity and quality control, share their knowledge, communicate with the public and educate the younger generation. Political authorities should respect such actions by scientists ...”.

26. While there is only one science which involves rational, objective thinking with rigorous standards and methods of scientific research, as also ethical rules that govern scientific practice, the thought processes that have evolved in different civilizations with respect to science have been quite diverse. Whereas developments in the industrialised countries have been principally based on pushing analysis to the limit, and using a reductionist approach which has yielded great success, Eastern civilizations have evolved thought processes in which completely different aspects of holism and harmony between different components play an important role. These are concepts that would apply to science and technology as well as to the functioning of human society.

### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE – THE COMMON BOND OF SHARED VALUES**

27. Countries should also be encouraged to rediscover their common heritage of shared values – beyond the diversity of languages, cultures and religions. This may require the creation of a common cultural space entailing full participation by civil society. Such space may benefit from mutual knowledge and understanding, improved commitment to human rights, tolerance and respect for others, respect for cultural, religious and ethnic pluralism, non-violence and, most importantly, dialogue. In that context reference could also be made to the culture of peace as “a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations”.<sup>1</sup>

28. The furthering of mutual respect and tolerance among citizens of different ethnic origin is a principle to be sustained in the development of inter-ethnic relations in the region, where the absence of powerful, cultural, historical norms of cooperation, or structural incentives to cooperation, have generated conflict, violence, deadlock, and secessionism. The challenge of the dialogue – and of the capacity to dialogue – is therefore significant in both national and regional terms, in the continuing transition towards stability and human and material prosperity. In particular, it holds a key for countries wishing to establish national harmony while at the same time coming to terms with very significant minorities living within their borders.

29. Cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Cultural pluralism refers to the ways in which different nation-states, civil groups and national and international institutions understand and organize cultural diversity, and it implies a sustained dialogue between meaningful pasts and desirable futures. Thus, cultural pluralism should not be seen as a constraint imposed by historical circumstances or an end in itself, but as an objective, which has been chosen and on whose development it is possible to exert influence. As such, it cannot operate strictly within national boundaries and must profit from the dialogue between societies.<sup>2</sup>

30. The construction of a genuine cultural pluralism supposes the abandonment of intercultural antagonisms and the rise of a shared culture based on the acceptance of diversity. The ability to manage cultural pluralism determines the maturing of society and makes the latter evolve from a state of political unawareness to a rational choice of building a democratic society capable of integrating differences. In this sense, cultural pluralism is an opportunity for the future and a motor for the present. It is this potential, which makes it a constructive force.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations resolutions A/RES/52/13 “Culture of Peace” and A/RES/53/243 “Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace”.

<sup>2</sup> The World Culture Report, UNESCO Publishing (2000), Towards a Constructive Pluralism. UNESCO/The Commonwealth Secretariat (2000); The Universal UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001).

31. In areas that have experienced ethnic wars the emergence of multi-ethnic states, built on a commitment to democratic principles, protection of human rights and the rule of law, as well as respect for and protection of minorities, and the development of good neighbourly relations and cooperation are prerequisites for regional peace and stability. Under conditions of open communications and equality, contact between groups generates mutual understanding and cooperation, not conflict. Contact in shared institutions is not necessarily an agent of cultural assimilation; but sustained contact under conditions of open communications and equality can contribute to the emergence of a shared culture of interaction and cooperation – or what has been termed a “civic culture”.

## **WORLD HERITAGE – HERITAGE AS A SHARED EXPERIENCE**

32. Sites on UNESCO’s World Heritage List are receptacles of memory for cultural heritage – both in its tangible and intangible forms –, embody the symbolic values of cultural identities and constitute a fundamental reference for structuring society. As a shared experience, the foremost constituent value of the heritage is diversity. Insofar as it enables people to understand themselves, the cultural heritage is one of the keys to understanding others. In certain circumstances, the heritage of others has and may become the symbolic target of aggression, ignorance and rejection. The protection of the heritage, and its presentation and transmission to future generations, are therefore ethical imperatives, inseparable from respect for the dignity of the human person and the “desire to live together” on the part of people and groups with different cultural identities. Today, heritage must be made a cause for the protection of the diversity of cultures and of dialogue between them.

33. This is particularly important in situations where claims to heritage – turning into disputes over national symbols – remain a potential source of conflict, instability, and human suffering. The challenge everywhere lies in associating cultural heritage with development policies and demonstrating how much this powerful symbol of a people’s identity can become a unifying factor for national reconciliation – not only as the mark of a common acknowledged past but also as the foundation of a shared future.

34. The linkages that unify the defence of cultural diversity, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the respect for sustainable development must be maintained. This was also one of the important lessons of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, where cultural diversity was acknowledged as inseparable from the economic, social and ecological concerns, and qualified as a “collective force” at the service of sustainable development.

## **INFORMATION AND THE COMMUNICATION MEDIA – BUILDING NEW BRIDGES**

35. The openness of inter-group contact and communication is an essential element in the pluralist paradigm. From this perspective, efforts to ensure the openness and freedom of mass media to inter-group communication are a potentially powerful means by which to begin to construct the social foundations for identities and behaviour that transcend ethnic communities. In some countries, the transition from state-controlled media to an information system, which respects press freedom, has been – and remains – a significant challenge. Among others, it implies the adaptation of media legislation and policies to internationally recognized standards of democratic media environment, involving relevant citizen’s groups; sensitization of decision-makers and media professionals on editorial independence – notably in the print media, new agencies, public service broadcasting and community multimedia centres – especially in a context of increased internationalization of the media and trans-national information flows.



36. Cultural and linguistic pluralism and the vitality of the various forms of cultural expression should also be encouraged through support to the production and dissemination of media products at the local, national and regional level. Creative endogenous television productions and promotion of the expression of cultural diversity through audiovisual media are equally vital tools for informing and alerting society to the existence of intercultural issues, questions and problems.

37. Moreover, the production and dissemination at the local, national and subregional level of educational, recreational and cultural products that meet the expectations of particular social groups constitute important means of ensuring authentic cultural diversity and promoting cultural pluralism. This requires genuine awareness-raising among governmental authorities and professional circles, as well as the promotion of partnerships among the public and private sector and civil society.

38. Mass media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are highly effective learning vehicles and have a growing influence on the perceptions of increasing numbers of individuals in all age groups. While mass media and other forms of communication can be misused to propagate messages of intolerance and hate, they constitute equally major vehicles to promote messages of peace, tolerance and dialogue.

39. Intellectual cooperation and dialogue are key tools for mobilizing public opinion for the promotion and defence of the freedom of expression and the right to information – which is closely linked to the right to education. The objective is self-evident: anchoring communication at the heart of national democratic processes, increasing diversity and plurality of contents as well as catalysing development issues.