

AN ADDRESS

BY

THE HONOURABLE CARL W. BETHEL, M. P.

MINISTER OF EDUCATION, YOUTH, SPORTS AND CULTURE

OF

THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

TO

THE THIRTY-FOURTH GENERAL CONFERENCE OF UNESCO

PARIS, FRANCE

WEDNESDAY, 17TH OCTOBER 2007

Mr. President of the General Conference

Mr. Chairman of the Executive Board

Mr. Director General

Honourable Ministers

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour to be present with you at UNESCO this afternoon and to reaffirm the commitment of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas to the ideals of this singular and indispensable organization. I think you would all agree that the current global situation compels us to redouble our efforts to promote peace among the peoples of the world in order to create an environment that fosters the full development of the individual, the orderly growth of society and a keen awareness of the shared destiny of human kind.

I pay homage to those men and women who had the vision and the conviction to bring UNESCO into being, and to all those who, over the years, have remained true to its mission and spirit. It is highly appropriate, therefore, to commend the Director General for his outstanding leadership, which continues to manifest itself in practical terms through the ability of the Secretariat to recommend effective ways and means to translate the

founding ideals of UNESCO into living policies, programmes and activities which are relevant to needs of contemporary society.

Mr. President

Ladies and Gentlemen

The Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, a small island developing state, is dedicated to building a country where all citizens are provided with equal opportunities to reach their full potential, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or background. Access to quality education lies at the heart of our actions to promote equality of opportunity for all our people, thereby encouraging good and productive citizenship among all who inhabit our beautiful islands. For the past forty years the priority area of education has consistently received the single largest allocation in our national budget. I am therefore happy to report that our investment in education is paying off and that, based on the latest available figures, our country enjoys a gross enrolment ratio of ninety four percent over all, with one hundred percent at the primary school level.

In further testimony of our enduring commitment to education, this year the Government of The Bahamas has increased five fold the number of

scholarship grants available to students at the tertiary level. Similarly, we have trebled the amount of funds set aside to support needy students at the College of The Bahamas, a state-owned degree granting institution, soon to be the University of The Bahamas.

The central position of education requires that it be consistently renewed and always relevant thereby allowing for the innovative and timely resolution of evolving challenges. And, while we are pleased with our successes in education to date, we recognize that we have more work to do, much of it at the pre-school and primary level, as well as among some of our adult learners. To this end, we have embarked upon a plan of action to improve literacy levels throughout the country and I should like to add that it is the firm view of countries of the Caribbean that UNESCO is best placed to assist in determining more accurately the true state of literacy in our region as we continue to address this vital issue.

Further, I am also pleased to note that ongoing dialogue between the public and private sectors in The Bahamas has led to an increased awareness of the need for greater cooperation in preparing students to be able to contribute meaningfully to the development of our country. I am equally happy that

UNESCO has pledged to lead the way in recommending strategies to assist member states in their efforts to facilitate the transition of young people from school to the world of work.

A relevant and effective curriculum, however, is not concerned solely with the acquisition of academic and practical skills but also seeks to inculcate attitudes and values such as diligence and discipline, honesty and integrity, and service to others and to one's country. It is this aspect of curriculum formulation which is crucial in addressing the declining standards of academic performance and the increasingly disturbing antisocial behaviour among some of our young people. As this is a growing preoccupation of countries the world over, it is heartening to know that UNESCO has included this concern on its agenda for the coming years. I might add that initiatives such as the Youth Path project go a long way in fostering life enhancing perspectives among our younger citizens.

Mr. President

Ladies and Gentlemen

There is no doubt that the phenomenon of globalisation has captured the attention of the vast majority of member states for, along with the many

opportunities that it offers, it also presents myriad challenges. In addition to the rapid advances made in information and communication technology, globalization is characterized by the more rapid movement of goods and services across borders and by a significant increase in rates of migration world wide. Given its strategic position and geographical location, The Bahamas is not only a major centre for tourism and financial services but is favoured as a location for settlement by migrants. Indeed, over seventy different nationalities and a wide variety of ethnic groups are counted among our population of 320,000. Additionally we play host to approximately five million tourists annually. For us, then, UNESCO's programmes in the area of intercultural dialogue and the promotion of heritage are central to the maintenance of social harmony, the preservation of cultural identity and the fostering of goodwill among the peoples of the world.

Mr. President

Ladies and Gentlemen

As you aware, a major component of the Bahamian cultural identity has its source in African traditions, as nearly ninety percent of Bahamians can lay claim to African ancestry. We were therefore pleased to join in activities to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic

Slave Trade, including a series of cultural events that featured the participation of the Honourable Naledi Pandor, Minister of Education of the Republic of South Africa and the distinguished Caribbean man of letters, Mr. George Lamming. A meeting of experts was also recently held in Nassau, jointly sponsored by UNESCO and the Antiquities Monuments and Museums Corporation of The Bahamas, to consider ways to institutionalize further the study of slavery and its legacy. For this reason, among others, UNESCO's designation of Africa as a priority area is indeed welcomed as it establishes a framework for reconnection, renewal and greater cooperation among countries and peoples of the African Diaspora.

Mr. President

Ladies and Gentlemen

The Bahamas is especially appreciative of UNESCO's stated commitment to leverage scientific knowledge for the benefit of the environment and the management of natural resources. In developing our societies we must ensure that our actions are congruent with those that promote sustainable growth. In the case of small island developing states, environmental protection, global warming and rising sea levels are not merely academic questions but go to the very core of our economic and, in some cases,