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Speech by

H. E. Mr. Ayub Quadri

**Adviser for
Education, Primary and Mass Education &
Cultural Affairs**

**Government of the
People's Republic of Bangladesh**

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Mr. President,

We are happy to welcome Singapore back in our midst. A warm welcome also to Montenegro as new member.

It is indeed an honour for me to speak before this august assembly.

Let me begin by expressing our deep appreciation for the recognition of Baul Songs of Bangladesh as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. These deeply spiritual folk songs celebrate humanity above all else.

It is a matter of satisfaction that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UNESCO and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been finalised. We look forward to early conclusion of the MOU and close cooperation between the two organizations.

I would like to inform the Conference that we have made discernible progress in UNESCO's areas of competence, in particular towards the EFA goals - literacy, primary school enrolment and gender parity. Part of our advancement owes to the moral and material support we receive from or through UNESCO. The progress in these key sectors demonstrates that our collective efforts can achieve a real purpose. My conviction is that it could be more extensive and more effective.

Mr. President,

On broad policy issues, I would first address the question of UNESCO's operational orientation. Eight years ago, Ambassador Koichiro Matsuura, taking over as the new Director-General, spoke of "a challenging paradox" - a paradox of UNESCO's being between a research institution and an operational agency. He concluded his observations on the point by saying that "ideals only take shape through action." On this fundamental premise, Ambassador Matsuura has the unstinted support of the overwhelming majority of member States including Bangladesh.

Much has been achieved over the past years. A lot remains to be done. UNESCO's impact remains still limited at the field level. One of the main reasons, I suspect, is the lack of operational orientation - an imperative unfortunately hindered by a false dichotomy.

The G13 on UN reforms suggested that specialized agencies should be seen as "centres of excellence." Unfortunately this coinage has been taken out of the context and used as an argument in favour of making a think-tank out of UNESCO. The term "centre of excellence" is followed by the recommendation that UNESCO should concentrate "on the development of normative and substantive policies in their respective fields and translating these into concrete programmes in close cooperation with the operational organizations". The emphasis here - on research-policy-programme linkage - should not be missed.

We are happy that the Director General has flagged the matter in unequivocal terms. We share his conviction that "UNESCO must be extremely wary of any tendency towards separating operational activities from normative, analytical and policy matters". We also agree with him that policy development must "engage with real-world problems" and that it should be "informed by actual needs and concrete situations". Although significant progress has been made in achieving E - 9 goals, eradicating illiteracy remains a major challenge in Bangladesh. At the same time, technical literacy, vocational training and quality of education are also pressing priorities. UNESCO needs to make itself relevant to these basic needs through concrete action.

Mr. President,

The second point I wish to highlight is the emphasis on field level actions. I am happy to note that the Director General is strengthening action at national, sub-regional and regional levels. It is essential that the field offices identify, with national authorities, the real needs of the country and the people. It is the field-level inputs which should form the basis of programming. I would also suggest that programming should take into account the priorities of the member States.

From a developing country perspective, I would underline the need for a more effective involvement of UNESCO with Common Country Assessment, UN Development Assistance Framework and Poverty Reduction Strategy processes. The UN's common country programmes should include UNESCO both in programming exercise and funding.

Thirdly, best practices. We note with satisfaction - the emphasis given to 'best practices' throughout the draft Programme and Budget for the biennium. Every Member State has something to offer others in terms of expertise, experience, innovations and successful models and institutions. It seems to us that without proper institutional support, the collection, collation and dissemination of best practices in different areas of UNESCO's competence may not be carried out effectively. We would suggest that the Director General considers the possibility of setting up a Best Practices Unit at the Secretariat for this purpose.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to reforms of UNESCO. We are supportive of the ongoing reforms and the discussions on the future role of the Organization. These exercises, including the deliberations here, should lead to formulation of policy recommendations and subsequent action. This General Conference may like to mandate the Director General to submit a report on Reforms and the Future Role of UNESCO for consideration by the next session.

Reforms should embrace programming as well. There should be a right balance between norm setting activities and programming. In this context, I would underline the importance of keeping the focus on UNESCO's fundamental mission - construction of the defences of peace in the minds of men. Addressing the root-causes of conflict, prevention of conflict and long-term peace-building should therefore form the core of UNESCO's activities.

Finally, Mr. President, I would like to say a word about the budget. We are talking about an annual budget of US\$ 300 million. Minus establishment cost, this means about US\$ 100 million programme budget per year for a specialized agency of 193 member countries! Yet we charge UNESCO with a global mission encompassing such vast areas as education, culture, social and natural sciences, communication and information.

Because of the small regular budget, the programme financing of UNESCO has to depend largely on extra-budgetary resources. It is time we rethink financing of the Organization. Predictable resources are fundamental to the strength of an organization.

It has been argued that an organization with global missions requires global mobilization of resources. Should we not take the question of financing of UNESCO to the people and to the lawmakers in our respective countries, especially when financial constraints impede the Organization in pursuing its goals and objectives? Long term construction of peace in today's world does not deserve less.

I thank you, Mr. President.

