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Organización
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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mrs Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the opening of the Sixth UNESCO International
Conference on Adult Education
(CONFINTEA VI)**

Belém, Brazil, 1 December 2009

Mr Fernando Haddad, Minister of Education of Brazil,
Madame Ana Júlia Carepa, Governor of the State of Pará,
Your Excellency Alpha Oumar Konaré, Former President of Mali,
Your Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands,
Mr Walter Hirche, President of the German Commission for UNESCO,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have travelled from over 150 countries to this historic city of Belém, set on the banks of two majestic rivers that flow from the Amazon rain forest, one of the great lungs of our planet. At the invitation of the Government of Brazil, the Sixth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education convenes for the first time in the Southern Hemisphere, in the home country of the late Paulo Freire, one of the world's most celebrated adult educators.

Our presence here is symbolic for many reasons. We are in a region that embodies the global challenge of responsible and sustainable development of the Earth's precious resources. We are in a vast country that harbours a tremendously rich linguistic and cultural diversity and counts among the world's largest emerging economies. It is a country staunchly committed to education and the reduction of poverty and inequality – to a model of sustainable growth that is the key to building more just and peaceful societies. This is the enormous responsibility we face next week at the crucial UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. There is but one wise choice to make: to seal a deal that will slow down global warming and set us on a more sustainable course. The entire world has a stake in protecting the Amazon, the world's largest forest, and supporting Brazil's ambitious commitment to reduce deforestation.

It is by learning throughout life that we can better understand our world and shape it – individually and collectively. It is clear that education has a major role to play in helping people at all ages to understand climate change and to develop attitudes, values and skills to better protect the planet we share.

UNESCO is committed to a comprehensive vision of learning at all ages. CONFINTEA VI is the fourth international conference on education organized by UNESCO since November 2008. Each one has focused from different perspectives on how to build inclusive, innovative, high-quality education systems that serve the needs of all learners.

Today, we are here to demonstrate the power of adult learning and education to ensure a viable future for all. Our goal over the next four days is to take forward the agenda of adult learning and education by securing stronger political recognition of its critical importance for development and agreeing on concrete recommendations to increase its scope and reach.

As we all know, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 enshrined everyone's right to education. Even now, over 60 years later, we still need to reiterate that this right extends to children, youth and adults.

At all stages of life, education is transformative. It empowers individuals with the knowledge and skills to better their lives. More broadly, it opens the way to active citizenship and democratic participation. Evidence shows that it impacts on economic growth and per-capita income. This is why the provision of good quality learning opportunities for all throughout life is one of the smartest strategies for reducing inequalities and promoting more harmonious and just societies.

Adult learning counts more than ever in the era of globalization. Economic integration, technology, migration and the complexity of global challenges place a high premium on knowledge and skills. Rapidly growing economies such as Brazil's are highly dependent on expertise in all domains, from agriculture to health. No country has ever climbed the human development ladder without steady investment in lifelong learning.

Literacy, starting in childhood, is the point of departure of comprehensive lifelong learning policies. Today, one in six adults – a staggering 774 million – cannot 'read

the world' as Paulo Freire would put it because they lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Sixty-seven percent of these adults are women, with dramatic consequences for the well-being of their children and families. We cannot build a viable future on these grounds. Such educational disparities – between people, regions and countries – are simply not compatible with a fairer globalization.

Together, in 2000, we committed to change this by adopting an ambitious set of goals to improve human well-being. The Millennium Development Goals are precisely about rendering human dignity to the excluded, reducing the unacceptable incidence of poverty, hunger, maternal and infant mortality and HIV and AIDS. They are about ensuring universal access to education and achieving gender equality because we cannot build a better future when discrimination against girls and women persists.

The six Education for All goals adopted the same year in Dakar chart out a comprehensive agenda to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults. Two relate directly to this Conference: achieving a 50 percent increase in levels of adult literacy by 2015 and providing equitable access to learning and life-skills programs for young people and adults. The UN Literacy Decade that runs until 2012 is a worldwide drive to increase literacy through stronger political commitment, better programmes and bold advocacy. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is about ensuring that learners at all ages acquire the know-how to live and act in a responsible way, especially towards the environment. Both Decades are of particular relevance to this Conference.

Integrating adult learning and education into poverty reduction strategies and related social and economic policies is key to further progress towards all the internationally agreed development goals because knowledge and skills are essential to improve livelihoods.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today informed by the recommendations of preparatory conferences in Budapest, Lyon, Mexico City, Nairobi, Seoul and Tunis. Regional reports synthesizing the state of adult learning and education were presented and debated at each of these conferences, based on an impressive 154 national reports

submitted by Member States. This is proof of a remarkable commitment to adult learning – and to the CONFINTEA process.

Because the field of adult learning is highly diverse, it is difficult to define and monitor. But if we are to secure stronger political recognition of adult learning, we need sound evidence, cases of best practice and tested policies. To this end, UNESCO has produced the first-ever Global Report on Adult Learning and Education that will be presented this afternoon. Based on data collected from countries and other research, it makes a highly convincing case for adult learning and education. The Report shows that countries in all regions have put in place adult learning strategies and legislation. They have run literacy campaigns, forged new partnerships and made innovative use of information communication technologies. But these initiatives need scaling up. Exclusion prevails in all regions. Low participation among groups who stand to benefit most from adult education maintains a cycle of poverty and inequity. Adult learning is chronically underfunded and tends to suffer from poor coordination among the various partners involved.

It is evident that much more needs to be done. Twelve years ago in Hamburg, CONFINTEA V established learning as “a right, a tool, a joy and a shared responsibility.” So how do we make this a reality? We need effective, transparent and accountable action for lifelong learning. We need to align our actions with our words, by creating the conditions for young people and adults to benefit from relevant and empowering learning programmes. This calls for more sensitivity to learners’ needs, language and culture, better trained educators and an all round culture of quality. We need better coordination of all partners and significantly higher levels of funding, with a systematic focus on serving the most disadvantaged groups, especially women and rural populations.

None of these objectives will be achieved without the active commitment of all partners within and across countries. This is one of the reasons why we are here. Lifelong learning policies involve not only education stakeholders but also public administrations, private sector partners and civil society organizations. All must join forces for adult learning to really take off and show its full potential.

Ladies and gentlemen,

International conferences provide us with important opportunities to share knowledge, define priorities and recommend a course of action. What really matters is to translate our commitments into comprehensive national policies that benefit youth and adults, especially the most vulnerable.

To support the follow-up to CONFINTEA VI, UNESCO has prepared a draft Belém Framework for Action that is based on the regional synthesis reports and outcome documents. The document makes a great effort to balance what is desirable and forward-looking with what is realistic and possible for a world community with very diverse conditions and resources. A special section is dedicated to the international monitoring of the recommendations and strategies to be adopted here. I am confident that you will finalize and adopt the framework with a shared sense of responsibility.

As we begin, let me extend my warmest thanks to the Ministry of Education of Brazil and to the State of Pará for so generously hosting this Conference. We are all the more grateful in light of the tremendous efforts you made to reschedule it. There is a silver lining in every cloud: in this case the change in timing has given me the great privilege to attend as Director-General of UNESCO. Let me reiterate our appreciation for your sizeable financial contribution and your steadfast commitment to adult learning. I am confident that a new momentum for adult learning will be born here in Belém and carried across lands and oceans to learners throughout the world.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my great pleasure that Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, UNESCO's new Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, is with us today. It is my sincere hope that drawing on your commitment and expertise, UNESCO will make progress in further increasing the literacy rates of children, youth and adults.

I cannot close without mention of the current financial and economic crisis that has spread from high rise corporate banks to towns and villages the world over. It is hitting the most vulnerable hardest and making our world more insecure. Behind forecasts of curtailed growth, deeper poverty and job losses lies a human tragedy that we must act to avert with intelligence and vision. Investing in adult learning and

education is to invest in hope and opportunity. It is part of the way out of the crisis. The financial crisis cannot serve as a justification for reducing resources for education. This is more than ever a time to reinforce cooperation and partnership – between North and South, among countries of the South, between governments, multilateral and bilateral partners and civil society – because education is a societal project. It is more than ever the time for donors to respect their commitments to education and to finally recognize the power of adult learning for turning poverty into opportunity.

We have a historic mission: to make a difference. Let us agree now to use this high profile opportunity here in Brazil over the next few days to find ways to harness the power of adult learning and education to make the world more just, peaceful and viable. Let us commit ourselves to take action when we return to our respective countries. It would be the most fitting of all tributes to Paulo Freire and to all those youth and adults who are not benefiting from the precious right to learn – it is a condition of human freedom.

Thank you very much.