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**38<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Conference of UNESCO**  
**General Policy Debate**  
**Statement Federal Minister Dr. Josef Ostermayer**  
**Paris, 4 November 2015**

Mr President,  
Mme Director-General,  
Mr President of the Executive Board,  
Honourable Ministers, Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr President, let me first extend my congratulations on your election as President of the 38th General Conference. I can assure you of Austria's full cooperation in your endeavours.

Celebrating anniversaries always gives us reason to reflect about achievements and future directions. 70 years ago UNESCO was created to enhance intellectual cooperation comprising education, science, culture and communication. Its founding principles and standards have perhaps never been so in tune with the needs of our societies as today.

Worldwide we are witnessing frightful attacks against human rights and fundamental freedoms. We see a growing number of crimes against journalists, the destruction of our cultural heritage, the dislocation of millions of people uprooted from their homes and the denial to children of their right to education. Currently, there are nearly 60 million people worldwide fleeing from their countries. This is the highest figure ever recorded and will lead to a lasting change of our societies. It is important to show solidarity and to face this challenge in a humanitarian spirit. We have to perceive changes as an opportunity and actively shape the change. Not to forget the vital role that civil society and NGOs play in achieving this change.

Quite rightfully, on a political level the new **Agenda 2030** places education as one core element of the **Sustainable Development Goals**. Education is an important enabler and driver to “transform our world”: for ending global poverty, building a life of dignity for all and leaving no one behind.

Austria is fully committed to free and comprehensive basic **education** that integrates the pillars of Education for Sustainable Development as well as Global Citizenship Education. Our initiative in the Executive Board to further UNESCO’s role in promoting Global Citizenship Education was supported by a large number of countries and continues to develop and grow.

Global Citizenship Education enables individuals to engage with complex global topics and with an increasingly interconnected global society. Global Citizenship Education can help pupils and students to reflect on their potentials in supporting democracy and social participation, to

appreciate diversity and define their identity in a way that it is not distorted by fanatical and fundamentalist ideologies.

Likewise, we always have to bear in mind the eminent role and value of **culture** as an enabler and driver of development. Every development approach needs to build upon its specific historical, economic and cultural contexts. UNESCO has undertaken tremendous efforts to highlight the impact of culture on social cohesion, inclusion and growth. With a number of conventions UNESCO has set milestones to highlight the intrinsic value of culture for individuals as well as for societies, in particular the diversity of cultural expressions as well as the protection of cultural heritage.

Through her tireless efforts the Director General succeeded in raising global awareness for the protection of our common heritage, especially in armed conflicts, and the promotion of cultural diversity.

Austria is committed to maintaining the sovereign right of states to shape their cultural policies, in conformity with the universally recognized human rights instruments. It is our task to promote and protect an enabling environment which allows a diversity of cultural expressions and fundamental freedoms.

Sadly enough, we are witnessing emerging threats and deliberate destruction of heritage in several countries. Culture and cultural heritage are at the frontline of many armed conflicts today because of their symbolic values. In line with the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict we think it is extremely important to take measures already in time of peace, including

international and national awareness-raising efforts, enhanced technical assistance and capacity-building. Austria endorses **UNESCO's *Action Plan for Safeguarding Syrian Cultural Heritage*** and we are pleased to financially support this project. In Austria, my Ministry is currently organizing a multi-stakeholder dialogue forum to draw public attention to the problem of illicit trafficking of cultural objects and financing of terrorism.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

To use the full potential of education and culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development our joint efforts are needed.

During Austria's now ending four-year membership in the Executive Board we insisted on placing the organization above particular national interests. We actively supported all initiatives to enhance UNESCO's focus and relevance, visibility and impact – and we are today convinced that the organization is better positioned than before.

Thank you for your kind attention.