

Speech by Her Excellency the President of Malta on the occasion of the 70th
anniversary celebrations of the adoption of the UNESCO Constitution
November 2015

Director General

Chairman of the General Conference

President of the Executive Board

Excellencies

Distinguished Colleagues

We meet here today to commemorate UNESCO's seventieth anniversary. The world of today is very different from that of seven decades ago. One would hope it is a better world, a world that has grown in its appreciation of peace, and respect for human rights and human dignity. One would hope that we have learnt lessons from the past, from our histories that are all touched by the horrors of war and human suffering. I wish we could believe that the world has transformed itself into a better and more beautiful place.

Yet how can we possibly think that our progress has been sufficient, in light of the events that took place last week in Beirut, in Paris, and in other parts of the world? Lives have been destroyed, families have been torn apart, and livelihoods disrupted. Our peace of mind is under attack, by the purveyors of fear and terror. We are confronted, in their acts of directed cruelty, by a stark reminder of the evil that hides behind a mask of ideology, of perverted religion, of disordered culture. And yet this cannot be so.

Culture grows from the ground of altruism. It is built on cooperation and connection. The roots of culture find deep and enriching sustenance in the relationships we form, within our homes and our communities, in openness and in respect, and in care of the ultimate fragility of the *Other*. In the words of Martin Buber, the philosopher, "*All real life is encounter*", by which I understand him to mean that it is only in authentic encounters, even with those whose life paths seem most distant from our own, that we may initiate the kind of dialogue that shall lead to enduring and sustainable peace.

The opportunity presented by this conference is of vital importance. In thinking about a vision for UNESCO's future, we are invited to consider those people, those children, who today most keenly need our help as an international community. In thinking about UNESCO's future, we are challenged to find ways of fostering peace and understanding on a global scale. UNESCO must be reoriented towards today's

concerns, securing its relevance and affirming its mandate to foster a lasting peace.

I firmly believe that the founding mandate of **UNESCO** remains as valid today as it was seventy years ago. **UNESCO** remains critical in facilitating networks of solidarity between different communities at national, regional and global levels and in providing a carefully considered understanding of the challenges faced by humanity.

One of **UNESCO's** key roles must be the championing of culture as a force for dialogue. Culture opens spaces where even the most embittered enemies and the most distant communities can come together, held by the spirit of human creativity and imagination. **UNESCO** is a driver for social cohesion, for economic growth, innovation, and sustainable development.

Culture provides a context in which the work of conflict resolution and transformation can take place, a common denominator that can bridge difficult situations. Culture promotes mutual understanding and highlights shared priorities that transcend seemingly insurmountable barriers.

As an international community now committed to the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals, we must remember that development is inseparably linked with the realities of culture. We must listen to cultural practitioners, and accept that their knowledge brings with it a subtle wisdom that can give depth and quality to the goals we envision.

A vision in which diversity is celebrated, and mutual respect is given freely and openly.

A vision that shall, if given its due importance, ensure that the atrocities we have recently witnessed shall not be repeated.

As leaders we must make sure that the principles of cultural diversity motivate all spheres of policymaking, at every level. This approach needs to inform the way we do things, and needs to play an integral role in our practices, our legislation and all other instruments and institutions through which the lives of our communities are affected.

UNESCO must be encouraged to continue its role as a champion of culture. **UNESCO** must continue fostering intercultural understanding, by protecting heritage and supporting and celebrating our planet's diversity of human culture. Of special importance, **UNESCO** must continue to be a key voice for education so that every child, regardless of gender or socio-economic status, has access to quality education as a fundamental human right and as a prerequisite for human development.

In deliberating our vision for UNESCO's future, we must build on this legacy. We must capitalise on UNESCO's strengths, to address the challenges and opportunities that exist today. The Sustainable Development Goals agreed upon at the United Nations Summit highlight some of these present challenges.

In my address at the summit some weeks ago, I shared a vision for the future with my fellow leaders. The truth is that we are at a crossroads, a moment in time where unity and global solidarity are of key importance. We must make a renewed commitment to safeguarding human dignity and human rights, not for the privileged few but for each and every one of us, wherever we live and whatever our circumstances.

Today, we still face a situation where poverty affects millions worldwide. Food security, gender inequality, access to education, and threats to sustainability are some of the many challenges that require a concerted effort by the international community. The Sustainable Development Goals provide excellent guidelines on what truly merits the attention of world leaders at this critical moment in our history.

As leaders, future generations will judge us by the efforts we make. We must come together as partners to deliver tangible results, and produce a real change that shall benefit all humankind.

The role of UNESCO is critical, a guide and a companion in our journey.

We need to see this moment in our history as an opportunity for the global community to uncover the root causes of inequality. We must openly and honestly explore the structural inequalities that perpetuate harmful cycles of privilege and oppression, and in the process damage the lives of countless millions.

Let us also remember that measuring economic success is not enough. We often witness economies performing excellently in terms of economic output but the standards of living do not reflect a similar and corresponding improvement.

Economies would in many cases register growth but people in poverty or at risk of poverty would still face the same precarious situations - with devastating consequences for their future. This approach must change, and we thus need to be more comprehensive in our policy formulation and in the way we measure improvement.

In essence we need to go beyond measuring economic indicators and basing our policies exclusively on economic factors. We need to take into consideration indicators of wellbeing within our communities, because these are determinants that are of equal importance. The means to measure wellbeing already exist. We now need to use these innovative approaches to come up with policies that

strengthen and nurture our communities, not only on an economic front but on all fronts, and place human wellbeing at the heart of our concerns.

As leaders, we are in a strategic position to make a difference here. We need to make sure that equal access to opportunities is a reality for all.

The mandate of **UNESCO** in securing access to these basic rights thus remains. As leaders, we need to fully support **UNESCO's** work in these essential areas. My vision for **UNESCO's** future is that it should always remain a global leader in advancing knowledge and understanding among people; in championing true equality; in furthering popular education and culture; and in increasing and diffusing knowledge on a global scale.

We also need to think about the tragedies that continue to unfold in this day and age. Migration is a reality that persists in creating situations of great concern.

We need to continue finding tangible, dignity-affirming ways of addressing migration, anchored in a rights-based approach. Most importantly we need to think about every human being risking their life at this very moment. We must ensure that no more lives are put at risk!

Our meeting here today will undoubtedly make headlines throughout the world. Nonetheless, those same news headlines will also include grim stories about migrants and their often thwarted journey in search of better lives or life itself!

In determining **UNESCO's** role and its place in the future, it is therefore essential that **UNESCO** continues to place emphasis on the human face of migration. It is imperative that it continues addressing the implications of the movement of peoples within its fields of competence. It is necessary that **UNESCO**, in an unhindered manner, continues to anchor its interventions within the framework of universal human rights.

Dear friends

The achievement of Gender Equality is another agreed sustainable development goal, and one of **UNESCO's** global priorities. Gender equality is an affirmation of basic human dignity, and is necessary to create sustainable and peaceful societies. It is a fundamental component in development. We must recognise that issues of gender are strongly linked with other goals, and will have tremendous effects on the overall success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Even if some progress has been made, the fact is that women, girls and gender minorities continue to occupy a disadvantaged position throughout the world. This inequality is not limited to location, or to whether their oppression occurs in poor

households or in developing countries. Discrimination occurs in situations of peace with just as devastating an effect as in situations of conflict.

Reports continuously show that inequalities persist worldwide, affecting a wide range of rights, including health, education, public and political life, employment, and access to justice. In looking at a more equal future, we must all recognise that gender inequality negatively affects all people, regardless of their gender identities. The road toward gender equality should be viewed not merely as a transfer of opportunities or privileges from one group to another, but as a fundamental step in the enjoyment of all our rights.

One of the leading global campaigns on gender equality is the HeForShe campaign spearheaded by UN Women. Together with fellow Heads of State, I am committed to this campaign and its message of gender equality. Together with other Champions, we are determined to make a difference in the lives of women and girls worldwide.

To this mandate, through my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, I have added a focus on the protection and empowerment of gender minorities. We encourage all other HeForShe champions to do the same, recognising the importance of gender self-determination.

A key message of the campaign is that gender equality is not an issue faced by women or gender minorities alone. It is a human rights issue that affects us all. We all stand to benefit from gender equality, liberating us from prescribed social roles and the gender stereotypes of a binary system that must be interrogated, and transformed.

[Pause]

We are here to acknowledge the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of UNESCO's constitution.

Perhaps one of the most quoted line of the Constitution is "*since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*". This notion provides an impetus to acknowledge that UNESCO must continue to remain committed to peace always, and in all ways.

As leaders we must continue to support this mandate, and support the overarching mission of UNESCO. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, we must all strive to promote peaceful and inclusive societies.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you a project currently being finalised by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. Together with a number of international academic and professional partners, we are in the process of establishing an Institute for Peace and Wellbeing.

We are interested in researching, motivating, and inspiring cultures of peace and wellbeing, exploring best practices, and finding the most efficient and effective systems of knowledge sharing.

Through this Institute we shall engage with communities, with a special focus on our Mediterranean region. We want to learn about how communities can achieve wellbeing, as active citizens who can effectively access and enjoy their rights. We want to promote inclusive spaces within societies, as a direct pathway to peace and wellbeing.

In line with **UNESCO's** priorities and objectives we believe the Institute can be instrumental in fostering understanding and peace on a communal, national, regional and international level.

We believe there is a deep need for dialogue. Many of the voices that call out, in need of answer, are met with a deafening silence. We wish to be that voice which comes in reply to break the silence, small at first but insistent in our commitment to the great work at hand.

Peace and wellbeing are two pillars that provide the most firm foundation for our future, and those of future generations. Let us strengthen this foundation by doing all that is within our power to eradicate poverty, to diffuse conflict, and ensure the equality of all members of our human family.

My fellow leaders,

In conclusion, I must mention the role of civil society and its place in the future of **UNESCO**. Civil society operates at grassroots level, in direct contact with the lived experiences and realities of all communities. It is essential that we continue collaborating with civil society and give its input the weight and importance it deserves. We have heard the cries of outrage, despair, fear and confusion provoked by last week's atrocities. We have been touched by this great suffering, and we stand here with the heavy task of determining a path forward.

Once again, **UNESCO** is called upon at this moment in history to play its part. We must listen and respond to the hopes of our peoples. We must ensure that we do not fail them.

I have no doubt **UNESCO** will live up to its mandate, strengthening its resolve and keeping true to its foundational values.

Together, we must promote equality and justice for all. Together, we must find ways of facilitating and brokering peace. Together, we must strive for the wellbeing of our world.

Thank you for your attention.