

Statement of the Republic of Latvia
by Ms Dace Melbārde, Minister for Culture

Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr President of the Executive Board,
Madam Director General,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentelman!

The distinguished Latvian poet Rainis, whose 150 anniversary has been included in the official commemorations of UNESCO this year, once said: "The sea is a collection of drops, a humankind is a collection of individuals". Following the idea of the poet and celebrating the 70th anniversary of UNESCO, I call us to remember that any organisation is as strong as its members are. There is no peace in the minds of men and women if it is not in the minds of every particular personality. And we should recognize that in spite of the numerous decades of UNESCO's work, today we are facing the unprecedented instability of the idea of peace in the minds of humanity again.

The changes in the geopolitical situation in the world which consequently resulted with the humanitarian crisis of the past years has widespread xenophobia and different forms of racism and intolerance. The lack of true and simple signposts has fostered the clash of values instead of their peaceful coexistence. And again, as never before, we see that this is a moment when the ideas of the culture of peace should be taken forward to flourish. Celebrating the 60th anniversary of UNESCO, the organization published a material "60 women contributing to the 60 years of UNESCO". Using this opportunity I would like to invite the organisation to prepare a material which could be called "70 outstanding examples contributing to the peace in the minds of men and women" in that way paying tribute to all nations and people who have worked in favour of the culture of peace in the framework of UNESCO.

Today when the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly we see that every idea and every activity is only a small drop, a small step in the history of humanity. Moreover, in the 21st century the concept of knowledge highlights the principle that only personal experience which is practiced apparently becomes the knowledge of humankind. Knowledge has its ownership and it is something that is possessed by a particular personality or institution. The idea of "thinking globally and acting locally" expresses the need to reassure the necessity for global citizenship as an important element of the culture of peace. And therefore I wish to call for strengthening all intergovernmental and international collaborative networks of UNESCO as a key element in the work of the organisation at the grassroot level. They serve as the backbone of UNESCO, as a key for stronger culture of peace in the world.

Mr President!

Being a minister of culture of the Republic of Latvia, I would like to point out the new role of culture in the 21st century. Every man is a creator of culture. If one feels strong and safe about his/her culture, normally it is much easier for him/her to understand also the other cultures and to accept diversity as a value. Practice and safeguarding of local cultural traditions and all forms of creativity - tangible or intangible - should be particularly promoted. Culture as a means of integration and participation, as a way of expression cannot be overestimated. Latvian history shows that culture has played a crucial role in preservation of the nation, its self-esteem and has been irreplaceable.

The tradition of the Song and Dance celebration in the Baltic States enlisted in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the Baltic Way sometimes called a human chain linking the three Baltic States in their Drive for Freedom which was inscribed in the Memory of the World Register point out that culture has been an indispensable resource to build the culture of peace in a non-violent way. Why do I emphasize these examples? Because I would like to reaffirm that today at the present world culture must be seen as a way to meet many world challenges and various international constraints and I am strongly confident that UNESCO should be a leading organisation which facilitates this process by all possible means.

Mr President!

UNESCO's mandate of promoting "the free flow of ideas by word and image" is relevant more than ever. The importance of access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms has been recognized in the new 2030 Agenda.

In this context Latvia holds freedom of expression and media freedom, both online and offline, highly on our agenda. Without freedom of expression and independent quality journalism there can be no truly democratic society of meaningful dialogue. This is exactly why Latvia was hosting the World Press Freedom Day events in May of this year and this is why we remain actively engaged in the World Summit on Information Society 10 year review process that will conclude in UN General Assembly this December. Latvia is committed to support UNESCO's work in promoting the safety of journalists and combatting impunity.

Let me conclude by another reference to the Latvian poetess Aspazija who has said "Every man is an artist and the substance to be developed by him is life. It would be very sad if a man left it as unused potential and didn't create from it something bigger, more beautiful and always nice". I call everybody to create something bigger than simple life, something more beautiful than daily reality and something that can be always called nice— culture of peace in the minds of men and women.