

**National Statement to UNESCO's General Conference
by
Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth Affairs
of St. Martin
Dr. Rhoda Arrindell
Paris, October 29, 2011**

Madame President,
Chairlady of the Executive Board,
Honorable Director-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is, indeed, a privilege for me to address this august body and an honor to have been admitted to your fold. My government intends to take full advantage of this to the benefit of our nation and its people.

This honor comes at a most propitious time for St. Martin, having just marked the first anniversary of our new constitutional status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It is by virtue of this new status that we are here today.

St. Martin, as you may know, is an island of 37 square miles divided between the Republic of France and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. That political divide is, however, artificial in a sense because there are no physical or mental borders in the minds of our people, for whom freedom of movement of goods, services and, persons has existed since the very beginning of our history.

Madame President, size is really a relative concept. Our attitude to size is summed up in these lines by one of our poets: “If 37 square miles of land/seems like a grain of sand/In your hand/Drop it in your eye and/Come again.”

Our size has not prevented us from facing the same challenges as countries a thousand times larger than we are, yet, our dreams are as big as those of the biggest nations in the world.

Education is the key to the success of the new nation we are trying to build on the foundation of a virile, resilient, and dynamic culture.

In his acceptance speech at the UNESCO Literacy Day in 2009, the representative of the Pashai people of Afghanistan, said that his people were “determined that their heritage, language, and culture will not die.”

We, on St. Martin, are also determined that our heritage, language, and culture will not die. We have similarly recognized that simple fact about how language impacts learning and have consequently made English the language of instruction in our schools.

In fact, the language issue on St. Martin has been at the heart of our education reform process. We are a multi-lingual society, but despite being a half-Dutch, half-French condominium, English is the mother-tongue of our people, while Spanish is the second most spoken language.

Cognizant of the role language plays in our education system, as well as in the development of our nation, my government is pursuing a policy of linguistic versatility, which seeks to make each student who completes secondary education proficient in at least three to four languages — English, Dutch, French, and Spanish. This, we believe, is the way to go for the new Caribbean man and woman.

In line with UNESCO’s Education For ALL program, I am pleased to report, Madame President, that compulsory education is in its third

phase of implementation in St. Martin. First implemented in 2008, it requires that our children be schooled between the ages of 4 and 18. The implementation of compulsory education has been complicated by the issue of undocumented immigrants. However, my government has separated the two issues thus facilitating the integration of children of undocumented immigrants into our educational system.

Compulsory education in St. Martin, however, is still a work in progress. We will be calling on UNESCO to assist us where necessary so that, hopefully, we could soon report that the process has been completed.

Another issue we are faced with in our education system is that of gender parity, not only among students in the classroom, but also in front of the classroom. As with students, there is a huge disparity between teachers, as female teachers greatly outnumber their male colleagues. We are seeking ways to balance this equation.

Madame President, accurate, reliable, and timely education statistics are essential for our education system to achieve its goals of using our limited human and material optimally. We have, therefore, developed an “Educational Digest” as a first step in our effort to efficiently and effectively deal with the challenges we face in this 21st century.

Culture, Madame President, is inseparable from identity, and identity is not only about who we are, but also about who we want to be. St. Martiners are a resilient people who know that true peace is not only the absence of war, but rather an indispensable condition for all of us, big and small, rich and poor, to pursue happiness and live in harmony with one another and with our environment.

That peace starts and must grow and flourish in the minds of every man and woman, indeed of every child and teenager. If there is a message a small Caribbean island like St. Martin can offer the world, it is that we must focus on what unites us as a human family rather than on what divides us. There is no other way to create a culture of peace.

“Culture,” as St. Martin’s foremost poet sings, “is work” and work is what we are here to do.

We hope to benefit from the experience and expertise UNESCO can offer us, specifically in the areas of tangible and intangible heritage.

Madame President, I did not come here to present a shopping list. In fact, St. Martin believes its associate membership of this organization will enable it to make a more meaningful contribution in areas such as language and publishing to the rest of the Caribbean region, and perhaps even beyond, as our destiny calls us to do. We are, therefore, eagerly looking forward to a mutually beneficial relationship.

May I end, Madame President, by congratulating you on your election and wish you continued wisdom and strength to guide this organization successfully.

I also wish to thank all the members for the unanimous support given to St. Martin’s admission into this global body. We pledge to uphold its ideals and to work diligently with its institutions to ensure that, together, we can achieve the goal of universal solidarity based on “the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace (which) are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance,” as the UNESCO Constitution states.

I thank you.