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Organización  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
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联合国教育、  
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**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the Lecture at University of Comenius**

**Empowering Youth, Promoting Diversity -- New Foundations for Resilience**

**and Peace**

**Bratislava, 6 May 2016**

Professor Karol Mičieta, Rector of the University of Comenius,

Excellency Ms Klara Novotna, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of  
Slovakia to UNESCO,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Professors and Students,

I am deeply honoured to be awarded this *Commemoration Medal*.

I accept this on behalf of UNESCO, as a sign of the trust you place in the work of the  
Organisation today.

I take this as a symbol of the values that underpin the partnership between Slovakia  
and UNESCO, to promote dialogue and cooperation, for lasting peace.

I see this as the ethical mission of all higher education today.

We must provide young women and men with skills that are relevant to society, to  
the world of work.

We must also engage young people in nurturing the values the world needs today  
and tomorrow.

Solidarity, dialogue, human rights and equal dignity.

I can hardly think of a better place to speak of these than here, at the University of Comenius.

This is the oldest and most outstanding of universities in Slovakia.

It bears the name of the one of humanity's great thinkers.

John Amos Comenius was a theologian and philosopher of the Enlightenment.

He was an advocate for equal opportunities, including for girls and women.

He was a teacher, committed to practical and lifelong learning, whose educational ideas are still echo powerfully.

He was, most of all, a humanist.

In his own words:

*We are all citizens of one world; we are all of one blood. To hate a man because he was born in another country, because he speaks a different language, or because he takes a different view on this subject or that, is a great folly.*

Centuries after they written, these words have never been so relevant.

We are living through turbulent times.

Opportunities are high everywhere for positive change, for trade and prosperity, for exchange and dialogue.

But challenges are steep.

Conflicts endure across the world, eluding resolution, tearing societies apart.

We see the rise of violent extremism, terrorism, striking at societies across the world.

I think of the brutal attacks in Paris in January and November, 2015, and in Brussels this year.

In Syria and Iraq, we see a devastating humanitarian crisis exacerbated by a new phenomenon of cultural cleansing.

We see human rights violated on massive scale, minorities attacked, women enslaved, journalists beheaded, cultural heritage and cultural diversity destroyed.

I see this as a new global struggle for hearts and minds.

Some 60,000 twitter accounts support Daesh today, with an average of one thousand followers.

This is also an information war, threatening freedom of speech, free thinking, seeking to manipulate young minds.

In response, we must share even more the power of knowledge, the wisdom of culture and higher education institutions, like this one, have a special role to play.

You are the largest generation of young people humanity has ever seen.

You are the most educated, most connected, most widely travelled, and most outspoken young generation the world has known.

You are leading positive change in societies across the world – but you are also shouldering the heaviest burdens of transformation.

You are the first generation that can end extreme poverty -- you are also the last generation that can stop climate change.

Today, 1.5 billion people live in fragile or conflict affected countries – 40 percent of them are young people.

Some 73 million young people are unemployed.

These figures are sobering, but they must not discourage us, because they are not the future.

The future is in this room.

The future lies in our common resolve to act together, to build a better future for all.

This is UNESCO's role, to empower young women and men everywhere in decisions that affect their future, to provide opportunities for you to lead.

This means nurturing each of you, as peacebuilders, as activists, as entrepreneurs, as change-makers.

UNESCO was created 71 years ago after a devastating war, on the idea peace had to be built in new ways.

Our Constitution opens with the following words:

*Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of women and men that the defences of peace must be constructed.*

Peace must be built in schools, in universities, to empower young women and men, because we know there is no more powerful force than education.

This idea stands at the heart of the new *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* -- specifically Sustainable Development Goal 4, which UNESCO helped shape, to ensure *"inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."*

This is why fostering global citizenship education is a UNESCO priority.

This is about learning to live in a world under pressure.

We need new forms of cultural literacy, on the basis of respect and equal dignity.

We need to connect the dots between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

This is why it is so important education for sustainable development is inscribed in the 2030 Agenda -- this is essential to take forward the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

Being a global citizen today calls for new ways of sharing the wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity as a force of renewal, belonging and innovation.

This is essential to prevent violent extremism and youth radicalisation.

This is essential to share a different vision of humanity, a different vision of the society, where people can live together in diversity, and resist the tide of racism and xenophobia that is now hitting many parts of Europe.

When voices here and there say humanity is not a single community, when they say diversity is unacceptable – we must respond by showing the strength of that dialogue between cultures.

This is why I went to the University of Bagdad last year, to launch a new global social media campaign -- #Unite4Heritage -- to engage young people across the world in countering hate propaganda, in strengthening the narrative of a single humanity.

This is why UNESCO is strengthening its action against youth radicalisation on the Internet.

Last September, I spoke on the importance of education at the *Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism*, in New York, on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

In November, UNESCO held the first ever Global Conference of Ministers of Education on education to prevent violent extremism.

In Iraq, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Jordan, UNESCO is investing in education for young Internally Displaced Persons and refugees, with the support of the European Union.

In the *NetMed Youth project*, UNESCO is supporting the civic engagement and inclusion of young women and men in 10 countries around the Mediterranean.

All of this is part of UNESCO's contribution to the implementation of the United Nations Secretary-General *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*.

The stakes are high, it is true.

But my key message today is that all societies have strong assets upon which to build, and these are just at hand.

Intelligence, talents and generosity are everywhere – with education, with an enabling environment, we can make it blossom and grow for the benefit of all.

In times of limits – limits of resources, limits of our planet – we can make the most of our ultimate renewable energy -- that of the human mind.

Education is key to empower boys and girls... especially girls and women.

Gender Equality is the way to double our intelligence, our creative power. It is not

As we speak, UNESCO's new *e-Atlas of Gender Inequality in Education* shows girls around the world are twice as likely as boys to remain completely excluded from education.

Only 60 percent of countries have achieved parity in primary education and only 38 percent in secondary.

On current trends, the most disadvantaged girls in sub-Saharan Africa will only make it to school in 2086.

If we decide to focus on gender equality, we can unleash a limitless potential, for the future of all societies, and this is something we just need to decide.

It is doable.

The same is true for the promotion of cultural heritage.

Culture is our ultimate renewable energy for innovation, belonging and resilience, cultural diversity is a wellspring of ideas, for the renewal of societies and this is not

something we need to import from elsewhere, or create out of nothing: it is already there, culture is who we are, it is around us, it is everywhere, all we need is open our eyes and nurture this potential.

This is why I launched in 2011 the global initiative -- *Culture: A Bridge to Development* – to open new space for cultural cooperation.

This is why we have rebuilt the mosques in Mali and preserving manuscripts, to safeguard the wisdom of Islamic thought in philosophy, in medicine, in art and architecture.

This is why UNESCO decided to rebuild the Old Bridge of Mostar, as a symbol of renewal and reconciliation.

These same goals guide UNESCO's leadership of the *International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022)*.

I wish to single out Slovakia here for its support to the values driving UNESCO, to safeguarding humanity's cultural heritage and diversity for the benefit of all.

Slovakia enjoys seven sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List, embodying outstanding universal value.

Slovakia holds four UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, two of which are transboundary, and including one Global Geopark

Slovakia has three living traditions inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, including last year's inscription of the Bagpipe Culture.

All this highlights values that have deep roots in Slovakia, to tackle the challenges we face today.

Comenius once wrote:

*There is no rock or tower that cannot be scaled if ladders are placed in the proper position or steps are cut in the rock, made in the right place, and furnished with railings.*

I look around this room and I feel deeply encouraged by the energy and enthusiasm I see.

Our task, indeed, must be to position the ladder properly, to craft steps at the right place, so all humanity can move forward together.

This is the message of Comenius, the message that each of you embodies, and, in this spirit, I am honoured to receive this Commemoration Medal.

Thank you.