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Organización
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para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
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Address by Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO,

**on the occasion of the opening of the general policy debate
of the 38th session of the General Conference**

UNESCO, 3 November 2015

President of the General Conference,

Chairperson of the Executive Board,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On 25 September, at the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development, Member States agreed on a new vision for humanity, for the planet, for peace, for the next 15 years. This happens in the year when we celebrate the 70th anniversary of UNESCO.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marks the culmination of years of efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, to chart a new course, to tackle remaining and new challenges.

UNESCO stands at the heart of this turning point. This reflects the leadership of Member States. This reflects the will that exists across the world to join forces, to make the most of all opportunities. And opportunities are rich – opportunities for dialogue and cooperation, opportunities for social inclusion, opportunities for sustainable growth and peace.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a call for deeper solidarity, for stronger collective leadership, for ownership. This has never been so important. The new Agenda comes at a time of turbulence when the suffering of refugees has

deepened, when poverty is rife, inequalities are deepening and when the planet faces increasing pressure.

Across the world, conflicts are tearing societies apart. We see the unprecedented rise of violent extremism. We see human rights and dignity flaunted. We see education under attack and children, especially girls, forced out of learning. We see women violated as targets of warfare, excluded. We see freedom of expression challenged, journalists killed.

UNESCO was created in 1945, in a world rebuilding after devastating war. UNESCO was founded on the idea that humanity is a single community, sharing values, a past and a future. It is the idea that lasting peace must start with human rights and dignity. It is the idea that human ingenuity is our greatest force to tackle complexity, to build peace. This idea resonates deeply today.

On 30 August, the Temple of Bêl in Palmyra, a UNESCO world heritage site, was destroyed by explosives. The Temple was a symbol of millennial dialogue between cultures. This is why it was destroyed. This is what I call cultural cleansing. A war crime, cultural cleansing is a strategy to spread hatred and to undermine peace, by attacking cultural heritage, diversity, by attacking women and men, by infringing human rights, by attacking communities. Extremists are terrified of history – this is why they attack it, because of the messages it carries of diversity and dialogue.

The museum of Mosul has been vandalized. Parts of ancient Hatra have been bulldozed. Nimrud has been dynamited. The Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo has become a battlefield. In Iraq, two of four UNESCO world heritage sites have been destroyed – Hatra and Ashur – as well as at least nine other historic sites. In Syria, all six UNESCO world heritage sites have been damaged by fighting. Across the region, illicit excavations have taken on industrial scale, financing further violent extremism.

Culture, ladies and gentlemen, we know from history, has always been the victim of war. What we see today is unprecedented. These are attacks against people, on the basis of ethnicity and religion. These are attacks against human rights and human dignity, against the humanity we all share.

The world has changed since 1945. But the spirit that gave birth to UNESCO has never been so urgent. Seventy years after it was written, we must not tire in repeating the opening of our Constitution: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed”. This, I believe, expresses the essential humanism at the heart of UNESCO. Human rights, human dignity, human ingenuity. These are our greatest renewable energies, to eradicate poverty, to advance sustainable development, to build peace.

The UNESCO Constitution continues to be a wellspring of hope. I see this hope expressed in the poem *To UNESCO*, written by the great poet Ko Un, from the Republic of Korea, whom this House welcomed on just two days ago:

How true and good can this world be?

How beautiful can this world be, after all?

To such painful questions

You reply by past and future.

Ladies and gentlemen, the challenges are steep – they always are – but so much more is our resolve, so much more is the power that we express through of solidarity. For 70 years, UNESCO has held a promise: to be the House of all humanity, to be the House of dialogue and diversity, on the basis of rights, and to be the House of ideas and action, to set the agenda, to craft solutions, to deliver.

UNESCO is fulfilling this promise. UNESCO is leading the fight against cultural cleansing. UNESCO is bringing all its expertise to bear in strategies to prevent violent extremism. Violent extremism may have many faces, but a single goal – to spread violence, to deepen fragmentation, to attack human rights and dignity, to undermine peace. It destroys heritage, it persecutes people, it violates rights, especially women’s rights.

In 2012, violent extremists destroyed the Mausoleums in Timbuktu, a world heritage site, in an attempt to erase the millennial history of Islam in this region. A year later,

in 2013, the French President François Hollande invited me to visit Timbuktu, and I promised UNESCO would rebuild the mausoleums. This July, I returned to Timbuktu, to celebrate the rebuilding of all 14 mausoleums, by UNESCO, with local communities, with the Minister of Culture of Mali.

I saw then the power of culture to restore dignity and pride. I saw the joy of women and men, retrieving their heritage and traditions. I saw the confidence this brings to build a better future. This is UNESCO's response to violent extremism. This is our response to cultural cleansing.

We are mobilizing the world to stop the trafficking of cultural objects. We are acting with INTERPOL, the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime, to support implementation of the ground-breaking United Nations Security Council resolution 2199 (2015), banning the trade of cultural goods from Syria and Iraq. UNESCO is working with governments, to strengthen legislation, to build capacity, to stop this channel of financing terrorism. This is our response to turbulence.

UNESCO is putting forward education as a force for human rights, for jobs, for peace. Young women and men need skills to think critically. They need competences for dialogue across cultures. They need support to their aspirations to become global citizens. This is the new frontline for hearts and minds across the world. This is where UNESCO is leading.

In June, UNESCO organized the high-level conference on "Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism", with the support of China, Egypt and Bulgaria. In March, at the University of Baghdad, with the Iraq students, I launched "*#unite4heritage*", a social media campaign that has taken off across the world.

On 6 November, UNESCO is organizing the first-ever High-Level Conference on Countering Violent Extremism through Education, with the United States and others partners. To accompany educators across the world, UNESCO is developing a "Teachers' Guide for Countering Violent Extremism". This is our response to hate propaganda. UNESCO is advancing education for internally displaced persons and refugees, in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, with the backing of the European Union and the State of Kuwait. UNESCO is spearheading global

citizenship education, taking forward the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Global Education First Initiative.

We are crafting education for the twenty-first century, to teach new values, new ways of behaving, for peace, for sustainability. This is why UNESCO led the International Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, which closed with a successful conference in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan in 2014, and we will lead this further.

No one should be excluded – all voices must be nurtured, especially young people, whose ideas resonated powerfully last week at the 9th UNESCO Youth Forum. UNESCO is nurturing young women and men and youth initiatives in 10 countries across the Mediterranean, through the Networks of Mediterranean Youth Project, backed by the European Union.

UNESCO is supporting States, to sharpen public policies for social inclusion, led by the flagship intergovernmental programme on Management of Social Transformations (MOST). We are sharpening our foresight, to shape a better future for everyone. This is our response to social exclusion.

Young women and men are leading change across the world. They shoulder also its heaviest burdens – both online and offline. The Internet must be a force for exchange, for creativity. It must be a platform for human rights, for peace. People speak of a new generation of “digital natives”. I believe we need a new generation of “digital citizens”.

This spirit underpins the UNESCO comprehensive Internet study, mandated by the last General Conference. We need new forms of media and information literacy. We must advance global citizenship online. We must stand up for freedom of expression.

Over the past decade, more than 700 journalists have been killed for bringing news and information to the public. As Director-General, I stand every time and call for justice. Here again UNESCO leads the way. UNESCO is championing the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. We are supporting legislation, working with the police, judiciary and armed forces,

building capacity, training journalists across the world – in Nepal, in South Sudan, in Tunisia, in Pakistan, in Somalia, in Mexico, as well as in Myanmar. We created the Global Alliance on Media and Gender, to empower women in and through media.

All cultures, ladies and gentlemen, are different, and this diversity is a wellspring of strength. But no society stands alone. We stand together. Humanity is one, united by aspirations, by human rights and dignity. This is what UNESCO defends. This is why UNESCO is teaching the most tragic chapters of history, from the slave trade to the Holocaust, to fight against discrimination today, to prevent genocides.

UNESCO is leading the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) all across the world. This spirit guided the Third World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, in Baku, Azerbaijan, last May and the international conference on interreligious dialogue in Kazakhstan.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot allow humanity to be divided into “us” and “them”. History has shown where this may lead. No one should be left behind. This is the conviction that drives the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the words of its Declaration, it is “an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people”.

Across the world, societies are demanding change. Governments have responded. United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, described the new agenda as a “paradigm shift”. In the words of the Secretary-General, and I would like here to pay tribute to his leadership: “These goals are a blueprint for a better future”.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a catalyst for great advances in societies across the world. In 2000, 100 million children did not attend primary school; today there are 59 million. The MDGs have lifted millions of people out of poverty. All this has helped governments to understand and better utilize the power of education, especially girls’ education, for sustainable development.

This progress must be applauded and UNESCO’s role must be recognized – in leading the education for all (EFA) movement, in helping countries to make use of sciences, encouraging culture for inclusion and development, promoting freedom of expression and media development, acting as a catalyst for the empowerment of girls and women, and accompanying Africa’s renaissance.

However, this is not enough – we must continue to move forwards. The 2030 Agenda will complete unfinished business and tackle new challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen, these universal and transformative objectives are clear: to eradicate poverty; to promote prosperity for all; to strengthen universal peace; to protect the planet. The 2030 Agenda is ambitious – it is what has to be done. The 2030 Agenda is universal – it is the only way forward.

The great Brazilian teacher and philosopher Paulo Freire said: “The greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves”. The new programme is a programme for liberation, from poverty and from exclusion.

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are based on UNESCO’s vision and competence. UNESCO’s vision frames Goal 4: “To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This is based on the consultations led by UNESCO, the Muscat Agreement, and the results of the innovative 2015 World Education Forum, held in Incheon, Republic of Korea. I would like once more to express my gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Korea. This reflects UNESCO’s broad and holistic approach to education.

UNESCO’s vision of the transformational power of empowering girls and women stands alone in Goal 5 and reaches across all the other goals.

UNESCO’s vision of water is built into Goal 6: “To ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. This draws on the contributions of UNESCO’s International Hydrological Programme and our “water family”: institutes, centres and Chairs.

Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time, culture, cultural heritage and diversity are recognized as enablers of inclusive and sustainable development - which is included in Goal 11 and in the political declaration of the 2030 Agenda. This was UNESCO’s promise and my personal commitment. Thanks to Member States, the promise has been met.

UNESCO’s vision helped to shape Goal 14: “To conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”. This reflects the

contribution of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, and all UNESCO's work for ocean science and sustainability.

UNESCO's vision of protecting ecosystems and biodiversity is reflected in Goal 15, and in Goal 13, "to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts". UNESCO's vision of the importance of science, technology and innovation can be seen throughout the new Agenda.

UNESCO's vision of harnessing new information and communication technologies as development multipliers is included. UNESCO's vision of freedom of expression and access to information as a human right, to promote transparency, good governance and the rule of law, is taken into account. UNESCO is showing this same will to support governments in preparing for the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 21. We are contributing with our mandate and across all fields of competence. This conference must be the success the world needs, and I would like to thank the Government of Peru, where the COP took place last year, and the Government of France, where COP 21 will take place, for their leadership.

What world do we want to live in? The 2030 Agenda is our answer. The great Mexican writer and diplomat Octavio Paz once said: "Deserve your dream". Now, we must get to work, to deserve our dreams, we must mobilize every source of energy and all forces. UNESCO is ready.

Ladies and gentlemen, our shared task is to renew the founding pact of our Organization. Throughout its long history, UNESCO has demonstrated its ability to propose projects which raise us up, which bring peoples together on the basis of a lofty ideal.

The cranes of UNESCO moved the blocks of stone of the temple of Abu Simbel almost 60 years ago, and the idea of international solidarity was born at that time.

In recent years, UNESCO has brought about the installation of early-warning systems for tsunamis around all the world's seas; it has registered cultural sites shared among various countries, on a continental scale, along the Silk Road or the Inca Trail; and it has rebuilt the mausoleums of Timbuktu.

UNESCO must always raise itself up to that level. It has come a long way in a single decade. Consider the worldwide situation of creative industries; the new role of culture as the lever of the economy of knowledge, innovation and new technologies; how States are investing in culture to strengthen social inclusiveness, to combat poverty and promote sustainable development.

These changes are based on principle, and it was UNESCO which created most of the tools to open up this potential, from the 2005 Convention to the historic recognition of the role of culture in the 2030 Agenda.

Consider the radical change in worldwide discussions on the role of education over the past 20 years, which initially focused on issues of access but are now about quality and the acquisition of knowledge. This is a considerable change and UNESCO has yet again designed the tools which are structuring the debate.

Consider UNESCO's involvement in Africa for the development of science and technology policies. Two years after the first historic forum in Nairobi, last year's ministerial declaration in Rabat reflected unprecedented political commitment in that area.

We must hold this course while constantly adapting our responses to take account of the evolution of the modern world. In an increasingly complex world, which is often unpredictable, States do not wish simply to benefit from programmes. They themselves wish to develop them and put them into practice. This vision is at the very heart of UNESCO and the specialized agencies.

Whether it is a matter of normative and legal support to countries, of counselling on strategic development or of capacity-building, UNESCO must always be present alongside States. UNESCO is a worldwide agency supporting talent and creativity, which are our renewable and matchless resources and the key to sustainability. At a time when humanity is coming up against the limits of its capacities and those of the planet, we must invest yet more and determine new ways to protect our shared international goods: education, sharing of knowledge and cultural diversity.

Leo Tolstoy spoke of this, recalling that we cannot know everything, and the only hope is to possess shared knowledge, which will unite humanity. This is the

distinctive mark of UNESCO, which we must put into practice. And we must believe in our strengths, because we have succeeded, all together, in converting a historic crisis into a lever of reform.

Ladies and gentlemen, UNESCO was the first specialized agency to be created after the birth of the United Nations, and our anniversary coincides with the latter's 70th year. When I took office, I committed to bringing UNESCO closer to the other agencies so that we would work together better.

We have achieved this and we will continue on our path, whether this is by working with UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund on youth education with the support of the World Bank; or in UNAIDS, where we have just adopted a joint strategy with 10 agencies to fight against HIV and AIDS. Tomorrow, we will launch the Education 2030 Framework for Action for all United Nations agencies, marking UNESCO's leadership in this field. I am also thinking of the UNESCO Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education, which I launched in 2011, bringing together private partners, Proctor & Gamble, the Packard Foundation, the Chinese airline Hainan, the Korean company CJ and many other stakeholders.

Beyond education, in every area of our mandate, UNESCO has strengthened its ties with the United Nations, whether with the International Telecommunication Union, within the Broadband Commission, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to fight against trafficking of cultural goods, the United Nations Environment Programme to manage water and protect biodiversity, the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations General Assembly for resolutions on culture, development and journalist safety, or the United Nations Security Council for the link between culture, education and the prevention of violent extremism.

UNESCO has demonstrated its capacity to lead global initiatives on behalf of the United Nations, with the United Nations Secretary-General's Scientific Advisory Board, hosted by UNESCO, and his Global Education First initiative. UNESCO is participating in the implementation of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM), which can revolutionize knowledge sharing between countries, as well as the training and skills landscape, and UNESCO must be in the forefront.

UNESCO has built on this partnership approach to expand our donor base and in particular rethink our funding with the development of self-benefiting funds, with more predictable long-term partnerships, and with new South-South cooperation schemes.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is how UNESCO is transforming itself. We need to go further still: the 2030 Agenda requires adaptation at every level. My message is that UNESCO is ready and is reaping the benefits of reform, and we will continue on this path. UNESCO is already participating in pilot schemes for inter-agency resource-sharing, to capitalize on synergies. UNESCO has invested in new information management tools for the field and between departments. Thanks to the new transparent portal, in just a click, anyone can see where donors' money is going and the impact it is making. That is a radical change.

We have entirely rethought our evaluation tools, in a way that has been commended by the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit (JIU). UNESCO is one of the very first agencies to adopt the new International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS), in force since 2010. This year, UNESCO hosted the Chief Executives Board, and we are fully engaged in the reform of the entire United Nations system in the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM), which I have been chairing for a year now.

This General Conference is examining a programme and budget designed using results-based management, which places us among the leading agencies in this field. At the last session of the General Conference, you adopted a number of measures to reshape relationships with our partners, non-governmental organizations, goodwill ambassadors and the private sector. We have scrupulously implemented them. The UNESCO Chairs network has been reformed, the network of category 2 centres as well. Cooperation with the National Commissions has taken on a new lease of life, as many of you have noted, and I appreciate that.

In particular, despite the crisis and the lack of funding, we have pursued the field reform in Africa. It would have been easy to suspend these efforts and wait for better times. We preferred to move ahead. We have absorbed the costs, simplified the network, reinforced the autonomy of the field offices and changed their

directors, focusing on gender equality. In fact, UNESCO's progress in this field has just been commended by UN Women. Throughout this period, we have been guided by a clear strategic vision and the principles set out in the Independent External Evaluation, on which we have reported regularly.

Of course, UNESCO has suffered from the crisis. Programmes have suffered and are still suffering. I have cut around 500 of 2,800 posts and redeployed staff in a way that has been commended by the Federation of Civil Servants' Associations (FICSA). While UNESCO is now more transparent and more active in its two global priorities, Africa and gender equality, and while it has transformed its working methods, I call on you to invest in UNESCO, in the quality of its network and its teams, and to build the stronger UNESCO that you need.

Ladies and gentlemen, on 1 November 1945, on the opening day of the conference to establish the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Archibald MacLeish declared that this Organization should help increase "the common understanding of mankind" so that "the peoples of the nations [...] recognize each other's common manhood, common humanity". Recognizing each other's common humanity: seventy years later, in a world that has social divides and also new tools for dialogue, this ambition remains intact, even if the means of achieving it must be brought up to date. The poet Edouard Glissant said that "having once discovered the whole world, we must discover the world together". Let us live together and not simply side by side. Let us live together in diverse societies, where abstract talk about "dialogue of cultures" is no longer enough. We need to find practical ways to live together on a daily basis – undoing prejudices, building defences against racism, antisemitism and intolerance in the media and in the street, strengthening the human rights that bring us together – in constant contact with diversity.

This is the new frontier of cultural diversity, and this challenge is part of a long historical process. From the great discoveries of the sixteenth century up to the new technologies of today, humanity has shown its capacity to establish contact and abolish distance. There is not a single place on the planet that has not been integrated with the rest of humanity, irrespective of race, origin or religion. The challenge is to abolish not physical distance but moral distance – to go from

creating contact to creating common ground. This is my proposal for a new form of humanism. The challenge is to build new relationships with others and also with the environment, which is not simply a place to exploit as “masters and owners” but a place to live in harmony, including with living creatures other than humans, with biodiversity. Cultural diversity is inseparable from biodiversity, as UNESCO was already saying 15 years ago. Today, when scientists alert us to new mass extinctions of species and at the same time we see extremists engaging in cultural cleansing, UNESCO must sound the alarm.

Facing this colossal challenge, every State measures the profound relevance and coherence of our mandate and the need for us to join forces in addressing education, cultural dialogue and freedom of the press, which are weapons of resistance and resilience, as well as the need to invest in research, manage risks and raise awareness of sustainable development.

Every day we see that this is possible. I am thinking of the SESAME science project in Jordan, which brings together scientists from a wide range of disciplines and which, 60 years later, is continuing the CERN project, created at the initiative of UNESCO. I am thinking of the transborder heritage sites and the natural reserves shared between several countries, particularly those in our Programme on Man and the Biosphere. I am thinking of ancestral cultures which alert us to the dangers of tsunamis, whether the Japanese stone tablets that mark the height of tsunamis or the traditional architecture of the Maldives that saves lives, and which serve as a link between successive generations. I am thinking of solidarity beyond borders – of the immense crowds from London to Baghdad and Rio to Mumbai that showed their determination to stand tall against extremism after the terrorist attacks in Paris, Copenhagen, Bamako and Tunis.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that the enthusiasm that we feel on seeing other men and women stand up for universal values half a world away creates a sense of belonging to the same human race, committed to progress and moral standards. These are the values that UNESCO must disseminate. And this is why, in our world of many divides, UNESCO Member States must use tangible, intangible and documentary heritage as a force not for division but for unity. And we have a responsibility to support projects that bring us together in every field:

consolidating the World Ocean Observatory, accessible to all in real time 50 years after the launch of the tsunami warning system; ensuring access to quality education for all, harnessing the potential of new technologies; creating archives for shared memory and textbooks on shared history; protecting our shared heritage sites, at the junction of several cultures, faiths or States; changing our view, for example, of small island States, which are in reality vast ocean States in the frontline of climate change with vital expertise for the world – in the spirit of the SAMOA Pathway. All over the world, initiatives are offering hope – and demonstrating the infinite resources of human talent and its ability to create new forms of solidarity.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the new humanism. If humanity has succeeded, through science and technology, in putting a small robot on a comet 500 million kilometres from Earth after 10 years of space travel, humanity can, through education and culture, succeed in building a global citizenship that is receptive to others and receptive to the world. I am convinced that culture will show the way: it teaches tolerance and shows that there is no “pure culture” since our destinies are linked and are constantly enriching each other. Extremism will always be afraid of culture because it embodies the unity of the human race in all its diversity. This is the message of the Palmyra bust reliefs, which tell us about the meeting of the peoples of Europe and Asia all along the trade routes of the Middle East. This is the message of the travellers on the Silk Roads, who carried the message of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity to China, and paper, compasses and tea to Europe. This is the message of Ubuntu wisdom, which is found in various forms in all the world’s cultures: we need others in order to be fully ourselves.

It is our turn to pass on this message and say, for example, that while the European Renaissance was driven by Greek knowledge handed down by Arabs, today the Timbuktu Manuscripts suggest another renaissance, born in the sands of the Sahel, with its sources in ancient Islamic wisdom. It is this fundamental pact, for humanism and cultural diversity, that we are called upon to renew. It was the wish of our UNESCO founders. It took courage, in 1945, to talk about intellectual solidarity in the aftermath of the war. Faced with the urgent needs of our world today, we must find the same visionary boldness. This is the heart and soul of UNESCO and has stood the test of time.

I will finish, ladies and gentlemen, with a quotation from the great Naguib Mahfouz. He said, “truth and justice will remain as long as humanity has a ruminative mind and a living conscience”, and this is our main purpose: to keep alive the “conscience of humanity” that Jawaharlal Nehru talked about. We are more determined than ever. At the age of 70, UNESCO has never been younger, more modern or more relevant, and the Organization will continue to renew itself and to innovate for sustainable development and peace.

Thank you.