

Thank you,

In many ways UNESCO works for a better future. Not with hard power, but soft power, with ideas. Doing this we often talk about young people and how we can help them. Often I thought we should not only talk about them, but talk with them more, listen to them and let them help us.

That is why today I asked the Dutch UN Youth Representative to UNESCO, Mary Kachavos, to take my place and address the Executive Board on behalf of the Netherlands.

Mary, the floor is yours!

Mr President, Mme Director General, Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honored to speak before UNESCO's Executive Board as Dutch UN Youth Representative to UNESCO. Most of the Board's decisions have or will have an impact on young people around the world. If UNESCO wishes to work for a better future, you need to include youth from all over the world as a special category within the governance of the organization – not only as a target group, but also as special partners, with a specific voice.

Our future is threatened by many things, but I want to focus on one thing: the threat of violent extremism. Even in the Netherlands, where children are known to be the happiest in the world, there is increasing uncertainty and fear for the future. We grew up without war, but today, 39% of young people in my country are afraid that war will break out in their lifetime. Also, 25% of Dutch students in vocational education feel unsafe at school.

Fortunately, most young people in the Netherlands still share UNESCO's values, and are willing to work together on this together. Our team of Dutch UN Youth Representatives goes to schools to facilitate discussions on topics like interfaith and intercultural dialogue, listen to our peers, and discuss these discussions with policymakers. Every time I experience that UNESCO's mission 'to construct the defenses for peace in the minds of women and men' is more relevant than ever.

Our generation grew up in Europe with open borders, and the majority believes that people with different religious and cultural backgrounds can live together in harmony. As long as there are safe spaces in schools and homes to confront and respectfully debate these differences, as long as leaders of different generations work together to create inclusive policies, we can create a better world together.

However, addressing the root causes of violence can only be done when everyone has a voice. This is especially important when working on preventing violent extremism and building peaceful societies, but to be successful structural youth participation in all levels of government is needed, as also emphasized by UNSCR2250. Active inclusion of youth in peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism means active inclusion in governance.

Madame Director General, dear ambassadors. We believe that what is necessary at the national level, is also necessary at the international level. We believe that young people are capable of organizing themselves – both in your countries and as international colleagues - once they have a common mission and beliefs bringing them together. This characteristic of ours should be used for the good: please make use of that – or the goodwill of young people around the world will be turned to cynicism and our energies channeled towards forms of identity and activism which may be less aligned with UNESCO's mandate!

To end I call on you to prepare and set up the Youth Forum for the upcoming General Conference in a way that young people from around the world are treated as partners and make sure their voices and their ideas influence the important decisions UNESCO makes for our future.

Thank you for your attention.