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Organisation
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Remarks

H.E Ambassador Michael Worbs

Chairperson of the Executive Board of UNESCO

**on the occasion of the Roundtable meeting on
Different models of multiculturalism: from theory
to humanitarian practice**

**UNESCO's approach to the promotion of
the many faces of multiculturalism**

V Baku International Humanitarian Forum

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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The Constitution of UNESCO, recalls “*That ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, [...] of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples [...] through which their differences have all too often broken into war.*”¹

To counter such suspicions, I would like to share some thoughts on our approach to the promotion of multiculturalism.

While globalism has brought advancements, poverty remains and inequalities are deepening while conflicts in many part of the world are tearing societies apart and exposing populations to immense suffering. These inequalities are bringing to the fore an unprecedented level of violence and extremism.

Acts of terror strike at the heart of communities all over the world.

Moreover, we are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. In 2015 alone, over 65 million people were forcibly displaced!²

Much of the contemporary debate over the value of multiculturalism centres on whether public multiculturalism – that which finds expression in concrete policies, laws, and regulation – is the appropriate way to deal with diversity.

In much of the literature and debates, multiculturalism is often characterized as a celebration of cultural diversity, encouraging citizens to embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music and cuisine that exist in a pluralistic society. These differences are taught in school, performed in festivals and displayed in the media.

However, such a model risks ignoring issues of economic and political inequality. Moreover, it potentially trivializes cultural differences, ignoring the real challenges that differences in cultural and religious values can raise.

It can also strengthen prejudice and stereotypes and even fuel the polarization of ethnic relations and imprisons people in unquestionable ‘cultural scripts’ for which dispute is not allowed.

In short, by limiting multiculturalism to customs, traditions, music and cuisine, this model stays superficial, ignoring the real challenges of cultural differences.

There is a need, therefore, for a more comprehensive model that also includes and emphasizes political participation and economic opportunities. Such a model allows the building of encompassing identities –which encourages and emphasizes cultural change and cultural mixing.

Such a comprehensive policy stresses that multiculturalism is about constructing new civic and political relations, overcoming political and economic inequalities which may persist.

The benefits of such comprehensive policies are manifold.

For example, a study undertaken by the Migration Policy Institute³ found that migrants living in countries that adopt comprehensive multicultural policies are more likely to engage in non-violent

¹ The Constitution of UNESCO, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

² UNHCR, *Global forced displacement hits record high*, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

³ Will Kymlicka, *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*, Migration Policy Institute, February 2012, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/TCM-multiculturalism-success-failure>

political activities directed at their country of residence. They are also less likely to be affected by discrimination and are more likely to become well-integrated citizens.

Additionally, Canada was the first Western country to adopt an official multiculturalism policy toward immigrant-origin ethnic groups in 1971. It remains the only country in which multiculturalism is enshrined in its Constitution.

A study undertaken by Irene Bloemraad⁴ compared the integration of Vietnamese immigrants in Boston and Toronto. Both groups were similar: that is to say that they arrived at the same time, had more or less the same levels of education, wealth, language skills, and so on.

Despite these similarities, the Vietnamese integrated more effectively into the political sphere in Toronto than they did in Boston. The author also studied the Portuguese community in Toronto and Boston and came to the same conclusion.

Bloemraad argues that Canada's proactive and comprehensive multicultural policies played a crucial role in this kind of integration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Multiculturalism is of prime interest to UNESCO as well, in so far as it embodies the ideal of reconciling respect for diversity with concerns for societal cohesion and the promotion of universally-shared values and norms.

UNESCO is committed to building solid platforms for exploring new opportunities for dialogue, for building intercultural competencies and strengthening cultural literacy, which are crucial in an interconnected multicultural world.

In 2001, in the wake of the events of the 11 September terrorist attack in New York, UNESCO was the first UN agency to take a stand against the destructive forces of evil.

It adopted the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity⁵ in which Member States reaffirmed their conviction that intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of peace and to reject outright the theory of the inevitable clash of cultures and civilizations.

The Declaration stresses that "*cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity*". It is therefore a powerful tool to help in the development of policies promoting comprehensive multiculturalism.

Equally, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage⁶ and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions⁷ further endorse multiculturalism.

UNESCO's ambition to create and promote a "*fruitful diversity of cultures*"⁸ continues to guide the work of the Organization, in particular in its standard setting function by providing practical tools for the management of diversity; or even in the elaboration of the General and Regional Histories to ensure a common understanding of our past in order to build a common future; or also in exploring

⁴ Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006

⁵ UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, November 2001, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁶ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, October 2003, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁷ Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, October 2005, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁸ UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, November 2001: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

the Routes of Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations – such as the Slave Route or the Silk Road – to build reconciliation and resilience.

These on-going activities actively contribute to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda – especially towards achieving Goal 16 *Promoting peaceful and inclusive societies*.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me leave you this this final thought.

Promoting multiculturalism nationally and at the global level should not be our ultimate objective.

Focusing on, and highlighting the perceived benefits of multiculturalism as means of mitigating racism and xenophobia, while laudable as sound arguments, will never be sufficient.

The actions we take to incorporate multiculturalism into our daily lives must also take into account the challenges involved in managing cultural diversity and the social transformations we witness in today's ever-changing and further inter-related world.

These actions and activities must be concerted, inclusive and people-centred, if we are to succeed in removing ignorance that leads to suspicion of the Other.

That is UNESCO's ambition. I hope it is yours as well.

Thank you for your attention.