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on the occasion of the opening of the 5th E-9 ministerial meeting in Cairo

Cairo, Egypt, 20 December 2003

Your Excellency, the First Lady of Egypt,
Distinguished Ministers of the E-9 countries,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you today for the opening of this biannual meeting of E-9 Ministers, being held for the first time here in Cairo, Egypt. Let me say from the outset how grateful we are for the generous hospitality of the First Lady, Mrs Mubarak, and for the excellent cooperation of the Minister of Education, Dr El Din.

This is the second E-9 ministerial meeting that I have attended since becoming the Director-General of UNESCO, the first being the useful Beijing conference held two years ago. This ministerial meeting is a regular event on the E-9 calendar but, coming ten years after the inauguration of the E-9 Initiative in New Delhi, India, it is an opportune moment for reflection.

The Initiative, which was created in the follow-up to the Jomtien Conference (1990), placed heightened attention on the E-9 countries for two main reasons. First, the relationship between education and population loomed particularly large because of the growing recognition that increased educational levels typically correlated positively with declining rates of population growth. Second, even with demographic trends in decline, the size of the high-population countries meant that the chances of making general progress towards the EFA and other education goals would be much enhanced if E-9 countries in particular were doing well.

During the ten years since the launch of the Initiative, there have been many positive developments in the E-9 countries. These include reductions in annual average population growth rates in all nine countries as well as educational improvements reflected in indicators covering several areas of education. In 2000, however, the E-9 countries, with over 50 per cent of the world's population, accounted for 70 per cent of the world's illiterate adults and more than 40 per cent of the world's out-of-school children. Educational trends among the E-9 countries are far from uniform, of course; some countries have certainly been making more educational progress than others. In some E-9 countries, the educational mountain remains very steep.

Whatever may be the exact relationship between the E-9 Initiative and the pattern of demographic and educational trends in recent years, the Initiative itself may be seen to have enjoyed considerable attention at first but afterwards, as years passed by, it appeared to lose some strength of purpose and identity. In the mid-1990s, for example, the E-9 countries sometimes acted as a definite group within some international fora; this tends not to happen today.

From the beginning, the clear emphasis of the E-9 Initiative has been upon EFA, and this was reinforced by the renewal of commitment made at the Dakar Conference in April 2000. There have been a number of post-Dakar developments, however, that collectively have created a new context for the Initiative and we need to take them into account.

Today, there is a clear need to better understand the Initiative - its purposes, its character and its consequences. To this end, UNESCO commissioned an independent external evaluation; you have received a copy of the evaluation report, along with other documents. I shall be frank. I am not satisfied with the professional quality of this evaluation, whose findings, conclusions and recommendations rest upon a weak basis of objective evidence. Let me be very clear: the external evaluation is independent and, as such, it does not reflect UNESCO's official position concerning the E-9 Initiative. Nevertheless, despite major misgivings over its lack of high professional quality, I have distributed the report in the interest of transparency.

The report, please note, is just one part of an ongoing evaluation process looking into the record of the E-9 Initiative and considering possible ways forward. We – and I mean both UNESCO and the E-9 countries - do need to learn lessons from the first ten years but our main purpose should be to look forward with a clearer vision and stronger determination. A “Note on the E-9 Initiative”, independently prepared by my staff, has been circulated to you and this contains a number of suggestions and positive orientations that I hope have been useful for your discussions. The key questions we must ask are: what has been the added value of the Initiative as far as the EFA drive in E-9 countries is concerned? And what could be the Initiative's future benefits?

It is my strong hope that the E-9 Initiative will continue and become more active as I believe it could make a significant contribution to the achievement of EFA not only in the E-9 countries themselves but also more widely. In order to have a greater impact, however, the E-9 Initiative needs to be strengthened and its goals and methods need to become more focused and better understood. Indeed, it may be necessary to re-visit its rationale and to devise and implement improved mechanisms of coordination and collaboration.

This process, in fact, has already begun at this meeting and I am encouraged by the importance you continue to attach to the Initiative. For its part, UNESCO sees at least five areas where it can make useful contributions to the further development of the E-9 Initiative:

First, we shall try to establish a closer linkage between the E-9 Initiative and the EFA process. In this context, I have decided to assign responsibility for assisting coordination and networking regarding the Initiative to the EFA International

Coordination Unit based at UNESCO Headquarters. This will have the major advantage of placing liaison with the E-9 Initiative among the main tasks of the UNESCO team that is directly involved in organizing meetings of the High-Level Group and the Working Group on EFA and promoting links with all constituencies within the EFA movement. In fact, the link between E-9 countries and the High-Level Group is already strong. Following the first meeting of the High-Level Group in Paris in November 2001, the two subsequent meetings were held in E-9 countries – in Nigeria in 2002 and this year in India. Furthermore, the next two meetings are scheduled to be held in E-9 countries: in Brazil next year and then in China in 2005.

Second, UNESCO shall also seek to encourage stronger links between the E-9 Initiative and regional and sub-regional EFA processes in follow-up to Dakar. This, perhaps, is where the leadership capacity of E-9 countries can be most effective and valuable.

Third, the South-South potential of the E-9 Initiative really does need to be looked at again. UNESCO would like to act as an umbrella under which better South-South collaboration may thrive among E-9 countries. Furthermore, serious consideration should be given to widening the impact of the Initiative beyond its specific members so that non-member countries can reap some benefits.

Fourth, I believe that the E-9 Initiative must be strongly supported by all international agencies, in particular the EFA partners.

Fifth, UNESCO shall continue to contribute to the analysis of the E-9 Initiative in terms of its record of achievements and shortcomings and its future potential. I have asked our Internal Oversight Service (IOS) to review key documents and to explore more deeply what might be the relationship between the Initiative and actual EFA achievements at the country level.

The real decision, however, is yours; namely, the E-9 countries yourselves. For the sake of the EFA movement in your countries and in the world at large, we hope that you will invest more energy and determination into the Initiative so that it becomes a more effective catalyst of EFA momentum and improvement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As in previous years, this biannual meeting has taken a specific theme as its focus of attention. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was selected at the last meeting two years ago in Beijing. I must say that, in the perspective of post-Dakar developments, the theme of ECCE has not received the same attention as other Dakar goals such as universal primary education or gender parity and equality in education. But, as the First Lady of Egypt has stressed, there can be no disputing the

importance of spreading the availability of ECCE so that it can serve as the foundation on which other aspects of EFA can be built. We need to integrate ECCE more fully into the mainstream of EFA activities. In addition, in this year when gender parity and equality in education dominated the attention of the High-Level Group and the EFA Global Monitoring Report, the links between ECCE, girls' access to education and girls' educational performance need to be given more consideration.

In conclusion, let me say that I feel that the E-9 Initiative does need to be boosted, both within UNESCO, among E-9 countries and, more broadly, within the international community as a whole. But we need more information and more reflection to come up with the right way forward. I am assured that, through this meeting, we have begun to engage with that task. We must recognize that E-9 countries do face fresh challenges – the impact of HIV/AIDS on education was not uppermost on people's minds ten years ago, for example. But there are, post-Dakar and post-Monterrey, fresh opportunities too.

Let me assure you that UNESCO remains committed to working with you. The E-9 group should have one of the strongest voices in the EFA movement. With better coordination, greater commitment and more sustained and continuous action, the potential of the E-9 Initiative remains high. Let us work together to ensure that the Initiative's potential is realized in coming years.

Thank you.