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Address by
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening of the E-9 Ministerial Meeting

Monterrey, Mexico, 13 February 2006

Your Excellency, Mr President,
Mrs Chen Zhili, State Councillor and Deputy Prime Minister of the People's
Republic of China,
Mr Governor of the State of Nueva Leon,
Distinguished Ministers of Education of the E-9 countries,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure and anticipation that I welcome the honourable ministers and their delegations, as well as other EFA partners, to this important biennial meeting of the group of E-9 countries. I would like to pay warm tribute to President Fox for his presence here today to open this Sixth E-9 Ministerial Review Meeting and I look forward very much to his remarks, which I am sure will provide real inspiration for our work. I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to our hosts, Mexico, for their willingness to organize this event and for their generous hospitality. We are very pleased indeed to be here in the thriving city of Monterrey in the State of Nueva León.

In November 2005, the High-Level Group's annual meeting was held in Beijing. I am very pleased that Madam Chen Zhili, as the representative of the host country of that successful meeting of the High-Level Group, is with us here at this opening ceremony. Her words to us this morning confirm the strength of China's support for EFA in general and the E-9 Initiative in particular.

You will recall that the Declaration of our last meeting in Cairo expressed the hope and desire to revitalize the E-9 Initiative. The Declaration, while taking note of the enormous challenges of EFA in the E-9 context, adopted a positive and forward-looking tone, with the determination to broaden and deepen cooperation and to draw in new partners, for example, from civil society and the private sector.

This renewed sense of purpose and commitment has led to significant developments over the past two years. Let me mention the most important of these:

- A rotating secretariat has been established, housed in one of the E-9 ministries and supported by the local UNESCO office. This was launched by the Egyptian Ministry of Education and the baton has now passed to Mexico.
- Each E-9 country has designated an E-9 focal point as a liaison amongst themselves, giving a stronger sense of ownership and continuity between meetings.
- UNESCO has ensured follow-up in close connection with EFA coordination, now that the two functions are located in the Division of International Coordination and Monitoring for EFA. This has included dedicated meetings

for ministers, officials and experts in parallel with major EFA events, such as the High-Level Group and the Working Group. UNESCO has also provided regular information on E-9 progress to Member States through meetings for Permanent Delegations.

- In preparation for this meeting, Egypt hosted the E-9 focal points in June last year – a clear indication of the renewed sense of identity of the Initiative, a fact also underlined by the valuable contributions made by E-9 members in the various EFA fora.

It is these positive developments that lead me to express keen anticipation as we meet here in Mexico. The collective enthusiasm of the E-9 countries and a heightened sense of esprit de corps give a basis for fruitful discussions and for practical, useful results as outcomes from this meeting. I hardly need emphasize that the progress of E-9 countries towards the Dakar goals will determine in no small measure whether or not they are achieved. Progress in the countries represented here will be critical to the success of the world's efforts to provide quality basic education for all. Indeed, as emerged clearly during the High-Level Group in Beijing last November, the addition of over 94 million adults to the literate population in just one country, China, had a major impact on global statistics.

The E-9 countries exhibit at one and the same time a number of common characteristics as well as great diversity. The size and complexity of the EFA challenge and the need to ensure quality of education for all sections of a large population are areas which every E-9 country must address. Issues of decentralization, quality control and ways to achieve educational success with the most marginalized groups are of concern to all of us here and raise special problems for the organization of education on a very large scale.

At the same time, of course, there are variations in the precise nature of the EFA challenge. For some countries, access to primary schooling is virtually universal, while in others this continues to require focused effort. Similarly, the amount of attention to be given to adult literacy, early childhood care and education, or lifeskills programmes respectively differs enormously. Looking at the wider socio-economic context, it is clear that some E-9 countries have experienced rapid economic growth, with a corresponding heightened presence on the world stage. This factor in particular means that the E-9 Initiative is attracting greater international visibility and support. For all countries, persistence in schooling and achieving successful completion by significantly more students remain unfinished challenges.

The agenda for our two days of discussions addresses both the EFA needs in E-9 countries as well as their potential for sharing their vast pool of knowledge and experience with others. The first theme that we shall address is that of quality – a major concern in education systems of great complexity and size: how is quality to be

ensured for all learners: urban and rural, female and male, adult and child, majority and minority? For UNESCO, quality is realized when learners complete their programmes of study successfully. We shall have the benefit of reports from each country on this theme, as well as the output of yesterday's expert meeting. I hope that you will find in these discussions fresh stimulus and innovative ideas to further improve quality learning in each of the countries represented.

Turning our attention then to the broader status of progress in EFA, an overview of the findings of the two most recent *EFA Global Monitoring Reports* - on gender equality and literacy, respectively - will illuminate our discussions with particular reference to the E-9 countries. Without pre-empting what the Director of the Global Monitoring Report Team will say, there are two aspects I would like to highlight. The first, noted earlier, is that there is considerable variation among the E-9 countries – a diversity which must inform our subsequent debates and which in itself offers a useful perspective on the endeavours of each country. Second, even where much remains to be done in terms, for example, of adult literacy and quality of schooling, considerable progress is being made – this should be an encouragement to all of us to yet further efforts, building on positive experiences and good practices thus far.

We will also take time to discuss the question of South-South cooperation, of which I believe the E-9 Initiative is already an outstanding example. Following the proposal made by Brazil in the meetings of the High-Level Group and the EFA/Fast Track Initiative (FTI) in Beijing last November, we will examine the possibilities of further developing South-South cooperation through mechanisms which enable the E-9 countries to offer their expertise and support to other developing countries – harnessing their demonstrable strengths for the common good. UNESCO is very interested in this innovative idea and stands ready to offer support in appropriate ways, should this meeting wish to move forward. The question of triangular cooperation with funding agencies and links with the Fast Track Initiative should also figure in our deliberations. Unfortunately, Jean-Louis Sarbib, Senior Vice President for Human Resources at the World Bank, is unable to join us here for this meeting due to the snowstorm in Washington DC but I am pleased to inform you that another senior World Bank official will contribute to the discussions on resource mobilization and the potential role of the E-9 Initiative in strengthening South-South collaboration.

As together we pursue the Dakar goals, it is clearly important that we keep good track of progress by means of reliable and timely data and statistics. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics works tirelessly with governments to develop capacity and to improve the quality of data collection and analysis, resulting in an increasingly accurate picture of how we are doing.

A further area of constant concern is the mobilization of resources. National budgets continue to be the best and most important way of funding education, and the

need for increasing allocations to education was underlined by the members of the High-Level Group. Working to mobilize increased external aid to basic education remains high on our agenda and UNESCO welcomes both the new pledges of aid made in 2005 as well as the efforts of funders to align their aid more directly with national government plans and priorities.

EFA faces a number of particular challenges in today's world. Conflict continues to disrupt the learning opportunities of too many children and adults, and can exacerbate gender imbalances. The poor and vulnerable, already the last to benefit from quality learning, are the first to suffer from the devastating effects of war and civil strife. I cannot emphasize enough the need to pursue EFA as part of the search for lasting peace and as a prevention of possible conflict in the future.

Another challenge is the HIV and AIDS epidemic, which is not only a personal tragedy but has hugely negative effects on educational systems. The UNESCO-led EDUCAIDS initiative, under the umbrella of UNAIDS, seeks to optimize the use of strategies of preventive education to tackle this problem.

Further, we cannot – and must not – remain immune to the fact that the world has missed the 2005 gender parity goal. I would urge you to bear this in mind in your discussions as a cross-cutting theme – each of our EFA meetings must serve to galvanize greater efforts to meet this goal as soon as possible.

These challenges should not discourage us – rather they should impel us to frank discussions of what needs to be done and to greater collaboration in the pursuit of EFA, without which neither the Millennium Development Goals nor the broader vision of sustainable human development can be achieved. Your commitment as political leaders is crucial to this goal.

In closing, I would like once again to thank Mexico, our hosts, for their welcome. It is also my pleasure to announce that Indonesia has generously offered to host our next meeting in 2008.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.