

Dear Madam President of the General Conference,

Madam Director General,

Distinguished delegates,

Honoured guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address the General Conference of UNESCO, the supreme political and decision-making body of this unique global organization.

As President Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". In my view, UNESCO has fully embraced this idea and has worked ceaselessly over the last decades to bring nations and people together through education, sciences, culture and communication. In the current global context, its ambition to contribute to peace and development through cooperation in the domains of education and culture is more relevant than ever.

At the outset I take the liberty to felicitate Madame Director General for all the accomplishments and express the thanks on behalf of my country, Slovakia, for your transformative work and commitment and dedication to the just cause of this Organization.

UNESCO, like other international organizations, as well as its Member States, has to face new global challenges and problems. I agree with the view that as an organization, it needs to modernize in order to grow stronger. The role of UNESCO should also become more visible in the framework of all UN Agencies. Slovakia stands firmly behind UNESCO in its pursuit of "building peace in the minds of men and women" and as a Member State of the European Union, strongly supports the further development of the already close EU-UNESCO liaison.

Furthermore, I would like to express my country's gratitude for UNESCO's active support in implementing the 2030 Agenda, which is a common responsibility of all Member States. UNESCO's support is especially valuable in the context of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, where UNESCO has played a major role in animating debates between Member States on some of the most pressing issues of our daily agenda. In order to ensure that UNESCO is able to fulfil its mandate of supporting Agenda 2030 implementation, strong support from Member States is crucial. Slovakia is a strong believer in the UN system. We are proud to hold the Presidency of the 72nd UN General Assembly, as well as to be an elected member of the UN Human Rights Council for 2018-2020. We are also an active member of several of UNESCO's intergovernmental bodies.

Slovakia is actively involved in each option to support the unique platform UNESCO is representing, and works to increase its visibility among all stakeholders, especially among the youth. I believe that it is a firm responsibility of Member States to implement UNESCO programmes at the national level and to further develop them both regionally and internationally in order to share experience, knowledge, profit and burdens, all at the same time. We are strongly advocating in favour of youth empowerment and inclusive education, while benefiting from the UNESCO programs.

Slovakia is also a member of the drafting committee of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and the member of the core group of the Global Alliance for Literacy and we actively implement these ideas at home. Inspired by UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, we have organized this year`s Lifelong Learning Week introducing UNESCO Learning Cities concept.

As Minister for Education, I very much appreciate UNESCO`s emphasis on education as a crucial tool for sustainable development and progress, in as diverse areas as economic well-being or the prevention of radicalization and extremism. I support the adoption of *Education for Sustainable Development* and *Global Citizenship Education* programmes into our school curriculums as a means of bringing comprehension between diverse cultures, as well as combatting extremism. It is crucial that we build quality education systems and institutions where people of all ages can come to understand and appreciate their cultural and historical heritage, as well as the fundamental values of freedom, democracy and tolerance.

As for the domain of culture the Slovak Republic is pleased to see the lead that UNESCO has taken on the protection and preservation of cultural heritage under threat due to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, particularly following UN Security Council Resolution 2199. Slovakia supports the strengthening of the international cultural protection regime, values dearly the intangible cultural heritage and its value for the global society especially the transnational inscriptions and we wish to play an active role within the Coalition Unite4Heritage.

In May 2017, Slovakia has launched the implementation of the World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme. We were happy to welcome Director Rossler in Slovakia in September 2017 and we look forward to deepening further our collaboration with the World Heritage Centre. My country appreciates UNESCO`s assistance in projects aimed at increasing the UNESCO brand name and visibility of Slovak World Heritage sites.

In 2018, designated as the European Year of Cultural Heritage, we look forward to developing our collaboration further, especially within the framework of the World Heritage Routes in the European Union. This unique project has been launched by the European Commission and the World Heritage Centre in order to attract tourists and promote other cultural assets such as museums and festivals along selected European itineraries.

Considering the agenda of the national implementation of the 2030 Agenda, it is the ambition of the Slovak Republic to make the 2030 Agenda a centre-point of long-term strategic planning and investment. In Slovakia, we are currently working to develop long-term national priorities for development and progress in key areas. We recognise that in this endeavour, the process is at least as important as the end-result. We therefore work in close partnership with all relevant stakeholders from the academia and the private sector to NGOs.

In order to deliver on these ambitions, we need to fully integrate the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the principles of sustainable development into all government policies across political cycles. I am ready to advocate for this paradigm shift in the way long-term

policy decisions are made in my country, as I am certain that this strategic approach will enable greater policy coherence, which is crucial for sustainable development.

It is evident that the new global challenges reflected in the 2030 Agenda are not to be solved by old-fashioned methods, and require adequate reforms and strengthened coherence of all the relevant actors across the international system. Slovakia, within its capacities and possibilities, has and will continue to contribute to the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals and rely on UNESCO's programmes in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Programmes such as the International Hydrological Programme (IHP), Man and Biosphere or the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme already form an integral part of our approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda in an external environment and we aim at strengthening these programmes on the domestic level as well.

Before concluding, allow me to revisit once more the question of UNESCO's future development and role, as I see it. UNESCO, in my view, needs to become a platform with the main role of building peaceful, sustainable, democratic, and inclusive knowledge societies. To achieve this vision, we do not necessarily need to engage in grand, heroic actions. Small acts, when multiplied by the efforts of millions of people, can lead the process of change. Slovakia is ready to add its share and to use its window of opportunity as the presidency of the UN General Assembly to advocate for a sustainable future for all nations across the planet.

Thank you for your attention.