

200<sup>th</sup> Session of the UNESCO  
Executive Board  
7 - 10 October, 2016  
Address by Dr. Karan Singh, India

President of the General Conference; Chair of the Executive Board;  
Director General; Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. I am honoured to speak to the Executive Board at this landmark 200th session. We are in the first year of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is a critical first turn on the road to Agenda 2030, towards a life of dignity and justice for all, and I commend the recent Sweden-led effort at UNESCO to focus on the next steps as we strive to collectively forge ahead. We, in India, are seriously committed to Agenda 2030. We see it as a vital necessity for a peaceful, sustainable and just world and have decided that at each session of our houses of parliament, one full day will be devoted to discussing progress on SDGs.

2. Education lies at the heart of the development story. Without delivery on SDG4 there cannot be a life of dignity for all. Through a slew of significant initiatives under the direction of Prime Minister Modi highlighting access, equality and quality, we are making every effort to ensure that no one will be left behind. I was pleased to learn that one such outstanding effort in India has recently been recognized by UNESCO. The 2016 UNESCO Confucius Literacy Award was awarded to the Jan Shikshan Sansthan Malappuram in recognition of its literacy-linked and innovative skills development activities among the underprivileged in rural areas. At the New Delhi-based Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP), UNESCO's specialist institute on Education which I have the honour to Chair, we are not lagging behind. The International Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism through Education

held at New Delhi on 19-20 September 2016 served to focus attention on what are pressing issues that can no longer be ignored. UNESCO has a key role in promoting education as a tool to prevent violent extremism.

3. We need to start the process where it is needed the most, in the benches of schools, and through new opportunities for youth engagement. Mahatma Gandhi had said : If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.

Just last week, through the Ahimsa lecture organized by our Permanent Mission to UNESCO together with MGIEP, Dr. Scilla Elworthy, peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, had mapped out needed skills to fight extreme force without using force in return. This was the core message of the Mahatma and lies at the heart of the UNESCO MGIEP, a tribute and testimony to his ideas of non violence and sustainable living. There is renewed relevance of the Gandhian lessons of ahimsa and satyagraha, peace and non-violence, in a diverse world confronted with conflict, insecurity and inequality, and India ratified the Paris climate change agreement on his birth anniversary last week.

4. UNESCO's unique mandate on Culture needs no amplification. Its Cultural Conventions are well structured and well defined. What is needed are adequate implementation mechanisms to ensure that UNESCO is able to make a visible difference at the ground level. In this context, I welcome the strategy adopted at the General Conference in November 2015 on the Reinforcement of UNESCO's Action for the Protection of Culture and Promotion of Cultural Pluralism in the event of Armed Conflict. I am pleased to note that there will be discourse on a proposed Action Plan for implementation of the strategy as well as on practical ways for implementing a mechanism in favour of rapid intervention and mobilization of national experts before, during and after conflict. I also commend the Director General for the various initiatives that have been undertaken by UNESCO this year, building on previous foundations, to

protect cultural heritage and diversity, which is urgently required considering the savage conflict that is raging in West Asia.

5. Culture is, above all, the repository of a nation's and civilisation's identity. We were gratified that the Nalanda Mahavihara, the world's first monastic cum scholastic institution, which dominated Asian learning and education for eight centuries from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. now belongs to humanity, thanks to the World Heritage Committee. It was a completely residential university believed to have had 2000 teachers and 10000 students and you will be glad to learn that a new Nalanda is now rising phoenix like from the ashes of the past.

Excellencies,

6. May I remind you, friends, that progress is impossible without change. I am aware that there is ongoing discourse on the need to "change" UNESCO, to make it more action-oriented and more policy-relevant to present times. I understand that there has been much churning on this issue at the weekend retreat of the Executive Board. We must make every effort to align the draft C5 to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. For this we must be prepared to prioritize. We must be carefully selective on what we seek to achieve, because UNESCO's resources are strictly limited. The guiding philosophy that must underpin our efforts must always be for the greater global good. I wish you good luck and much success as you mobilize all strengths to meet the challenge of the times.

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TOTAL WORDS - 878