

Speech by Dr. Karan Singh
Member of the Executive Board (India)
196th session, April 2015

President of the General Conference; Chairperson of the Executive Board; Madame Director General; Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure for me to greet you soon after the memorable address by our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. Since we met last year in October, much has happened to shake our conscience, but also to reinforce our faith in the desire of humanity to band together in a collective quest for peace and sustainable progress. We have witnessed the heinous attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in a painful, albeit futile, attempt to blot the irradiance of this beautiful city of light; the shameful destruction of our shared cultural heritage in West Asia in an attempt to violently impose dogma on cultural and religious identities; the dislocation and distress of communities uprooted from their homes and the denial to children of their right to education and indeed life.

For 70 years now, UNESCO has been at the forefront of the defence against extremism, fundamentalism, and fanaticism. Sadly, Paris has not been alone, with the vile and violent hydra of extremism and intolerance raising its head in cities around the world. This intolerance must be fought; the ignorance that it breeds in, defeated. The events of the recent past have served as a sharp reminder of the importance of UNESCO, dedicated as it is, to constructing the foundations of peace in the minds of men and women by offering them opportunities to explore their fullest socio-economic, intellectual and spiritual potential, thereby contributing to our common vision of sustainable development.

Today, all around the world, people are subjected to discrimination, violence and abuse, simply for exercising their faith, identifying with a certain religion or due to racial profiling. We see the rise of cultural cleansing. We see education under attack. We see

societies closing against perceived 'Others'. Let us re-dedicate ourselves to building a global society of tolerance, based on universal human rights, respect for diversity, introspection and a permanent and creative dialogue governed by mutual respect.

The UN Alliance of Civilisations and UNESCO's "*Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures*" are examples of intercultural confidence building in practice. My association with UNESCO has always been a source of pride to me, and I am particularly glad that through its initiatives on *Global Citizenship Education (GCE)*, UNESCO is teaching young people to be respectful of others, whilst being confident of their religious identity. Through its emphasis on "*democratic values, peaceful coexistence, human rights, tolerance, responsible citizenship, sustainable development, justice, solidarity and sustainability*", GCE can help learners define their identity in such a way that it is not distorted by fanatical and fundamentalist ideologies, and teach them to appreciate differences, tolerate diversity, support democracy and encourage greater social participation as equals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

India lost its leading light, the Mahatma, to intolerance, but we emerged from that tragedy only strengthened in our conviction that the world cannot be built on hatred or injustice, greed or lust for power. Education can help provide the answers to some of the greatest challenges of the 21st century, from poverty, conflict and deepening inequality, to threats related to climate change and environmental degradation. "*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*", said Nelson Mandela. This faith in the inherent transformative potential of Education has been behind our activities at the New Delhi based *Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development*, a Category-I UNESCO institute, the Governing Board of which I have the honour to Chair.

The inclusion of education is now a stand-alone goal in the UNSG's Synthesis Report. Our task now is to work with all Educational stakeholders to prepare a Post-2015 Educational Agenda that renders our Educational goals achievable, acceptable and universally relevant to all countries, while acknowledging their unique national contexts and socio-economic diversities. This vision is broader and bolder than past goals because it takes a lifelong perspective, seeks to integrate content and values embedded in global citizenship education and education for sustainable development, and emphasises inclusion and equity. This will require the strongest push from Governments and all stakeholders, specially from UNESCO. In this context, the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st century provides a valuable ideological framework.

Friends,

Indian wisdom tells us that there is an energy within all human beings which, if invoked, can enhance our physical and mental faculties and even bring about a transformation in consciousness. Along with the Zero, *Yoga* is India's greatest gift to the world and we are delighted that the UN has declared 21 June as International Yoga Day. I am equally pleased to note that UNESCO this year will celebrate the first International Yoga Day at its headquarters, and another recent initiative of ours - Yoga Classes at UNESCO - has got off to a flying start. In 2016 we will attempt to inscribe *Yoga* as the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

We live in troubled times, but let us not lose faith in our common humanity. We are on the cusp of change. A truly transformative global agenda is ours for the asking and achieving. Let us move forward collectively in full spirit and with the full weight of the power and principles of UNESCO. I wish all of you much inspiration in these hallowed halls as we continue to press ahead in these efforts to build a new world.
