

Ms Mailis Reps
Minister of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia
Contribution to the plenary debate of the 39th General Conference

Mr President of the General Conference, Madam Director-General,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Estonia aligns itself fully with the statement delivered by the European Union.

Our discussions at this General Conference are taking place in an atmosphere of increased tension in the world. We have seen violent attacks on the freedom of expression and opinion and mourned many journalists who have lost their lives in doing their job. We strongly support UNESCO's work for the safety of journalists and advancing freedom of expression. This is one of the clear priorities for Estonia.

UNESCO's leadership in SDG 4 ties in closely with Estonia's focus on new approaches to teaching and learning. In delivering SDG 4 UNESCO must make use of its advantages when cooperating with relevant international organizations. Supporting Member States in data collection and analysis has been one of UNESCO's flagships and Estonia is ready to contribute with our experiences and best practices in this field. Although methodology and coordination are important in order to assess the final results, we must not forget the processes of developing education systems since only this will ensure achieving the education goal.

Higher education is an integral part of SDG 4. There is a need for renewed higher education recognition principles that would be flexible and applicable for different higher education systems. We fully support the process of developing, adopting and implementing UNESCO's new global convention on recognition of higher education qualifications. This is a step forward to ensure equal access for all women and men - including refugees and displaced persons - to affordable and quality education.

Distinguished delegates,

Estonia strongly supports the activities undertaken by UNESCO to strengthen its action to safeguard cultural heritage under attack and in emergencies. UNESCO's global efforts to facilitate a coordinated international response have been strong and visible. Under Estonia's Presidency the EU is currently discussing its strategic approach to international cultural relations. One of the clear priorities pursued in cooperation with UNESCO is preservation and protection of cultural heritage, including in conflict zones and during peacekeeping missions and operations. It shows the success of UNESCO's campaign to integrate culture into peacebuilding. The question of financial support also needs to be highlighted. UNESCO Heritage Emergency Fund is an important mechanism to support UNESCO's strategy and action plan in this field. Considering the strategic importance of the Fund, we hope that it will have many contributors and sufficient resources in order to meet its objectives. Estonia will make its second contribution to the Fund by the end of the year.

The Estonian EU Presidency also gives a special focus to digital solutions, an innovative economy, security, and preserving a clean environment, notably through implementing the Paris climate agreement. Estonia is a strong advocate of opportunities that information and communication technology can provide for sustainable development. The digital change has come to stay. UNESCO with its vast network of field offices also needs to further modernize its processes and to make a good use of the modern technology in order to become more transparent and accountable. The Working Group on Governance has put forward numerous recommendations in order for UNESCO to become more relevant, efficient and inclusive organization and to improve strategic decision making. We value the open and Member State-driven process that has resulted in sound recommendations presented to the General Conference.

The Director-General has been forced to implement a Contingency Plan due to significant delays in payment of assessed contributions. We share her concern of the current budget freeze that means scaling down all activities across the house with associated programmatic and reputational risks. Estonia values the constructive and broad-based preparatory consultations on the next biennial budget that has resulted in a consensus proposal presented to the General Conference.

Estonia would like to warmly thank the outgoing Director General Irina Bokova for her dedication to the organization and many accomplishments achieved during the last eight years. We are also confident that her successor will show efficient leadership in pursuing UNESCO's mandate within the broader scheme of the set global agenda. It is only through joint efforts and cooperation that the SDGs can be achieved or in other words, the world can be transformed.

Thank you for your attention.