

SPEECH OF H.E. ALTAY CENGİZER
PRESIDENT OF THE 40TH UNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE
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Madame Director General,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board, esteemed colleague,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today I am bestowed upon a unique honour and privilege. This is a great privilege, and as with every privilege, it entails a great responsibility. The Fortieth General Conference will be one of the most important gatherings in the history of UNESCO. I cannot complicate the road ahead, but only hope to make it smoother to the best of my abilities. Aware of my responsibilities, I am here to help everyone, the Organization, the Member States and the Director General.

UNESCO Member States come in different shapes and sizes, yet the sanctity of our mandate is shared by all, and this is why we communicate with each other as equals. We have always depended on this inclusive vision. My door will be open to each and everyone of you. I will remain accessible in the rooms and approachable in the corridors.

In spite of financial strains, UNESCO is doing well. The Secretariat is truly committed to modernization and its strategic transformation. They are considerate of the concerns of all the Member States. The Director General's recent New York visit pitched UNESCO still further to the forefront of the most important challenges of today.

Let me now come to more specific issues:

It is singularly due to UNESCO's work that people over the world have a much better and widened understanding that protecting heritage, both tangible, and intangible is synonymous with protecting humanity.

If the world has an idea about what the SDGs really mean, this has been due to the incessant work and toil of our Organization. The challenge was to recast those goals from being a dry United Nations agreement to become a viscerally felt mission that people everywhere would want to support. UNESCO is admirably trying to fulfil its central role in this respect.

In this vein, the increasingly global nature of educational curricula has become one of the most important trends of our times. Everywhere, education becomes the highest priority.

Curricula are being overhauled to meet the requirements of 21st Century skills; governments everywhere invest heavily on education; research capacities are being strengthened...

Development is more comprehensibly associated with values, social and economic development goals are being integrated. Learning is now taken to be a life-long journey.

Governments everywhere aim more and more on the task of building strong individuals with self-esteem and a desire for personal development. We want our younger generations to be much more empowered than we were, to lead good and independent lives. The idea of “empowerment” has become the shining armour.

Everywhere, we aim at developing our youth into engaged and ethical citizens. The needs of girls are better served now and they enjoy a much-deserved priority. We understand that without girls and women, everything will be diminished by half.

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How heartening are all these...

I know of countries in Africa who, in the space of less than a single year, were able to expand education from a respectable 70% to a magnificent 95%.

Scientific and vocational training are on the move and UNESCO is working towards directing digital change towards becoming a force on the side of sustainable development.

We know better than ever that we will not be able to optimize development unless we are under-nourished culturally, and unless we have a better grasp of the implications of new scientific and technological developments.

All in all, education, science, innovation, and traditional knowledge now collectively operate and help us towards reaching sustainability.

The Humanist perspective does not only stay afloat, it is being subtly internalized by societies everywhere.

We are also moving towards a heightened awareness on the effects of climate change, and in particular, the need to protect bio-diversity, as this also directly concerns our well-being on this planet.

Open Science Program, Underwater Heritage, Ocean Science and the ethical side of Artificial Intelligence are renewed and exciting venues that embody a unique potential to push UNESCO further into tackling with the real and most relevant issues of our time.

We sometimes seem to forget that Higher Education is an integral part of SDG-4. The new Global Convention on Recognizing Higher Education Qualifications has been a real breakthrough. After all, people are now receiving education everywhere and move around the world. The Convention will help the lives of millions of students.

Madame Director General,
Excellencies,

I cannot, of course, have come up with a complete list of UNESCO's achievements. Whatever I recounted are primarily the successes of national governments. But the question is, how much central indeed, UNESCO has been and still is to these noble efforts...

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I am not saying that UNESCO has completed every task at its hand. Inequality, poverty, hunger, ignorance, all sorts of violent extremism, drugs and xenophobia are the scourges on Earth. Not only UNESCO, but other international organizations should devise new and more effective ways to eradicate these menacing curses on humanity.

On many counts, there is room for improvement. The importance of the diversity of cultures, for instance, is also a better understood phenomenon thanks to UNESCO's efforts. We may though, augment our engagement.

Likewise with freedom of expression and the safety of journalists. In this regard, we stand at a much incomplete and frightening station that simply robs away our values.

Whenever we encounter stubborn illiteracy rates, we must see that it will have a debilitating effect on our capacity to harness the dynamism of the Twenty-First Century. Hence fight against ignorance remains our common goal.

While our engagement with girls and women should continue unabated, we must do more on children with special needs. There are millions of them and they also wait our help. We can do more on the plight of vulnerable people, including refugees, migrants and displaced persons.

Our efforts on Global Citizenship Education will help to create more resilient societies as new challenges peculiar to our times arise. After all, Global Citizenship means that every citizen takes a responsibility in global issues which are common to all of us. This wider understanding of citizenship provides the moral and social framework to support the basic truth that, as humans, we do have a common ancestry, we are mutually dependent, and we are bound by a common destiny on this shrinking planet.

Je considère la lutte contre l'extrémisme, en particulier l'extrémisme violent, comme faisant partie des volets les plus importants de l'action de l'UNESCO, dans lesquels l'Organisation peut remporter un succès durable et faire véritablement changer les choses. J'estime que cette question mérite amplement d'être considérée comme des plus urgentes et des plus pertinentes, et donc de figurer parmi nos grandes priorités. Pour cela, nous devons trouver des moyens plus efficaces d'inculquer aux jeunes générations la discipline du raisonnement critique, afin qu'ils s'affranchissent de ce fléau qui consiste à juger sans avoir appris ni compris l'essentiel. Le raisonnement critique est également le fondement d'une existence éclairée, c'est-à-dire, selon les termes des philosophes grecs de l'Antiquité, une vie examinée... Nous procédons ainsi à l'examen de nos vies afin de déterminer où nous en sommes vraiment sur cette terre et si la réalité de nos vies est à la mesure de nos valeurs. Sans raisonnement critique, les démocraties ne peuvent prospérer et les préjugés abondent.

Dans le même ordre d'idées, je déplore vivement le déclin, si tel est le bon terme, des sciences sociales et des humanités. Bien entendu, les nouvelles avancées technologiques et l'attrait de la science sont appréciables, et pleins de promesses. Du moins en l'état actuel des choses. Ce fut une bonne nouvelle que l'UNESCO ait été officiellement chargée de conduire l'examen des nombreuses incidences de ces avancées scientifiques et technologiques.

Or, sans les aspects fondamentaux que constituent les sciences sociales, la philosophie et les lettres classiques, ces avancées n'auraient pas beaucoup de sens. Les humanités permettent en effet d'expliquer et de nous faire pleinement comprendre ce qui se profile à l'horizon.

The work of UNESCO, distinguished guests, on gender equality has been exemplary and the recent report entitled "I Would Have Blushed if I Could" powerfully demonstrated how insidious the prejudices against women could be encountered everywhere and in the most unexpected quarters.

It might be that we need another report of the same force and quality about how social media, fake news and the like had become forces in their own right that undermine democracy and enlightened discourse. Unfortunately, fake news has a unique staying power. Marie Antoinette, for one, never said "let them eat cake if they can't find bread!"

Then there are the less vicious examples: When Henry Kissinger visited China in 1971, he asked Chou en Lai what he thought about the French Revolution. Chou en Lai famously answered that it was too early to deduct its true meaning. Of course, Kissinger the historian, was asking Chou en Lai's thoughts on the Revolution of 1789, but the translator understood this as a reference to the events of 1968 in Paris.

Madame Director General,
Excellencies,

Let us see that the presently weakened financial position of our Organization cannot be perpetual. UNESCO should be able to make the right moves in the right time. For instance, this Organization cannot really afford any enfeeblement in its field office network. Priority Africa should be maintained. In this vein, it is time that UNESCO starts engaging into partnerships with private sector. No strings must be attached. It is the power and respectability of the UNESCO logo that we must offer.

We must avoid politicization, because it does not have a direct link with our main goal of achieving sustainability. It was mainly because of politicization that our many achievements were being talked about less and less. We must keep intact and protect the authoritative voice of UNESCO on issues that are within its competence.

In a world embittered by frequent national disasters, climate change is already a direct threat, especially to Small Island Developing States. Although they are the treasure of our world, we have not paid enough attention to their needs. Faced with their plight, we have to find genuine and action-oriented ways to show them our much declared solidarity, and start really hearing their voice as they expect.

When devising our future program and orientations, it would be wise not to lose sight of our achievements.

As our Director General has remarked, UNESCO has the ability to reflect philosophically. Hence it is time for UNESCO to start hosting the great thinkers of our times, philosophers, writers, and those who are making the change, so that we become more familiar with cutting-edge thought. This initiative should not, of course, undermine the intergovernmental nature of our Organization.

The ideal of a stronger UNESCO is more important than people generally believe. Our world is changing again in fundamental ways. I am not saying this as a ritualistic, languid incantation. A cursory reading of international relations and the many analysis of experts will not be enough to fully understand the transformations that are being shaped by impersonal forces.

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Therefore, international organizations should do their part in showing the way. A strong UNESCO can be a game changer, because it can shed a more powerful light on the nature of these transformations in a way no other international organization is apt to do.

Madame Director General,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It might be that we are drifting away from safer seas. Whatever the case, holding on to our commonalities, recognizing our many interdependencies, hence counting on our shared future, will once again be our only saviour. The world public has a more global outlook than the governments which represent them. Yet, when presented with failures and turf fight at international organizations, people are inclined to reject global cooperation. Let us keep this in mind during our deliberations.

UNESCO must continue to evolve to reflect its participants' enlightened self-interests. Each Member State is proud of its unique bond with the Organization, but it will be with just about enough solidarity between them all, that we can tackle our biggest challenges.

The promise of diplomacy lies in the fact that, basically it is a struggle against the forces of determinism. UNESCO is where we try to demonstrate to the world audiences that essence precedes existence! Not the other way round, of course, once individuals are freed to become personalities.

Let us not forget: Change happens towards thresholds. We can only hope that such thresholds and defining moments, when they arrive, can be manageable and usher in a better, safer, and more secure world. At such moments, there is glory to be reached in promoting to the very end, a principle, a belief, a position... Whereas, on the contrary, it seems that facilitation and mediation is somewhat, a thankless job.

Realpolitik, ladies and gentlemen, needs a space to come to fore. It is not solely about power politics, it is more about achievable and lasting goals. The space that *realpolitik* needs can only move between two poles which are in fact adjacent. They are not apart, they stick to each other: These poles are what I can call "Predicaments" on the one hand, and "Maximalism" on the other.

There will not be much point in forcing anyone's hand towards its predicaments, its dilemmas, if you like, the line beyond which it will not be able to do much. Maximalism starts at the point where predicaments are forced. This is how the creative middle ground gives way. Any solution that is gained through maximalism will not be lasting and repercussions would ensue.

There are always subtleties... Not everything is a question of power. Pragmatism, realism, prudent diplomacy, carefully thought out discourses that can pave the way to a genuine discourse and conversation are also important.

I am not sure whether "consensus" is always the right word. It might sometimes be the case that "convergence" can be more meaningful and have more practical value. "Convergence" is a stronger call for common sense and good judgment.

Let us try to converge this time along... Let us not quit dialogue in any premature way, and be aware of the distinction between cross-talk and dialogue, and that one cannot be a substitute for the other. Let us try to keep in mind each other's predicaments, so that we evade arriving at that onerous point where trust-building becomes an in-house work. The nexus that brings us together is not, and never was a knot! It is this nexus that we cannot risk to turn into a nodule, a Gordion's knot.

We cannot afford to lose UNESCO's moral authority, because UNESCO is a shaper and not a merely convener. Therefore, we need to understand better the implications of our choices.

Madame Director General,
Excellencies,

Times, priorities and outlooks can change *a la mode*, but only the classics remain after the wind tunnel is left. Exactly 53 years ago, the President of the General Conference was also a Turkish national.

It was the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of UNESCO and Monsieur Tuncel, the then President of the General Conference, greeted Charles de Gaulle, who as President of the French Republic, attended the General Conference and made a speech. I am now quoting:

“Des 1945, la capitale de mon pays a été choisie comme siege de votre noble et fraternelle instance. Mais, par dessus tout, ce qui inspire a la France une exceptionnelle sympathie pour vos travaux et pour vos actes, c'est qu'ils ont pour raison d'être de servir l'unité humaine, ce qui répond essentiellement a sa propre vocation.”

The last words of one of the greatest luminaries of all time, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, was in fact, nothing less than a bequest for humanity:

“More Light!”

This is our eternal mandate! So, more light to all of us here, more light to everyone on earth!

Thank you!