

:President of the General Conference

:Chairman of the Executive Board

:Madam Director General

:Excellencies

:Distinguished Guests

:Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the great honour and privilege of addressing you at the UNESCO General Conference this evening at the fortieth session representing Sri Lanka on behalf of the Minister of Education in Sri Lanka, Hon. Akila Viraj Kariyawasam. His presence has not been possible due to the Presidential Elections taking place tomorrow in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is bowing out of the Executive Board of UNESCO in keeping with the spirit of rotational representation of the Board by Member States. It has indeed been our great privilege to have contributed to the UNESCO Executive Board during the last four years representing the interest of Sri Lanka and other member countries.

It is our pleasure to join Member States in welcoming and congratulating the new President of the General Conference, His Excellency, Mr. Ahmet Altay Cengizar. We wish you every success, Sir and assure you our fullest cooperation.

At this juncture I wish to also place on record our sincere appreciation of the outgoing President, Her Excellency Mrs. Zohour Alaoui, a lady who has led the

General Conference in an exemplary manner, whom I got to know well in the recent years, Allow me therefore to express the warmest felicitations of my beautiful country of Sri Lanka to you, Madam.

We also appreciate the new initiatives launched by the Director General, Madam Audrey Azoulay, on UNESCO rebranding, public relations & fund raising.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 21st Century has brought forth many new facets in the fields of education, culture and science and we as Member States are working towards achieving our national goals in these fields. At the same time, we are also facing challenges of disruption in societies due to armed conflicts, drug wars, human trafficking, and

climate change resulting in natural and man-made disasters.

During the times of social upheaval in Sri Lanka, especially after the Easter Suicide Bomb Attacks of April 2019, we have come to realize the need to sustain, nurture and project the universally accepted UNESCO's mandate of '*building peace in the minds of men and women*'. To that end, children, who are the future of the world, must be given a holistic education to impart values of respect for the dignity and rights of others, respect for the environment and to inculcate positive attitudes.

In the light of the interrelated aspects of sustainability, economy, society and environment, we are moving from an age of fossil fuels to an age of renewable

energy. Likewise, we need to move away from violence to peace, from inequity to equal opportunity, from economic growth to sustainable development and from consumption to sustainable and conscious consumption, to ensure peace and sustainable development.

Since 2015, Sri Lanka has incorporated Goal 4 in its education development schemes and has determined to ensure *inclusive and equitable quality Education for all* through different initiatives including:

- The nearest School is the Best School Programme to decentralise and diminish inequity in the General system of Education
- 13 years guaranteed education Programme to retain children in Education

- “Suraksha” insurance scheme for all children to ensure a healthy and viable student population
- Digitization of Education through the distribution of electronic tablets to improve accessibility to knowledge and to enable equity in education for all.
- Vocational Training to ensure a skilled labour force is trained at the best standards combined with soft skills.

Sri Lanka has the privilege of hosting the only centre under the auspices of UNESCO for Professional Teacher Development. It is a Centre much needed for the South Asian region as the quality of education in any country is dependent on the quality of Teachers, who instil knowledge as well as basic human principals

in young minds. Learning indeed is lifelong, thus Teacher Education and Development should not be an exception. We are therefore putting much effort to expedite the operationalization of the Centre in the coming year. And we are looking forward to work with other countries in the South Asian Region to support teacher development and become a renowned regional hub for teacher development. We remain committed to its fruition.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Finally, we wish to reiterate the importance of the Cluster offices in the South Asian region whilst rationalizing the country offices. Combining offices into major regional offices alone will not allow efficient coordination, distribution of resources and delivery of

services among countries and UNESCO Headquarters. Recentralization of offices will only weaken coordination of their specific needs and overlook the important roles played by small developing nations.

Sri Lanka as a nation and UNESCO as an Organization, the path we have traversed upon has been trying, tumultuous and tiring at times.

As correctly said by the great Asian sage, Confucius, “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall”.

Through these times of turmoil, our commitment to peace and sustainable development remains steadfast, unwavering and resolute.

On behalf of the Government and people of Sri Lanka the beautiful tropical island in the Indian Ocean, I wish the 40th Session of the UNESCO General Conference every success as nations collectively gather to deliberate, debate, discuss and plan the path we are to tread in the years to come.

May the Noble Triple Gem bless you all!