

39th Session of the General Conference of UNESCO - Paris

National Statement – MALTA

Friday, 3rd November 2017

Director General

Excellences

Fellow Colleagues

Culture is who we are. It underpins our history, our identity, and our sense of belonging. It also forges bridges between people, connecting communities. Over the years UNESCO has undertaken substantial efforts not only to strengthen ties between societies but also to highlight the catalytic role of culture, education, and science in bringing people together.

As a result of its heritage roots and its multi-faceted diversity, Malta is in a unique position to appreciate the essence and value of culture in everyday life. Malta is confident that investing in our culture and heritage will lead to further cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy. Understanding culture brings harmony to so increasing multicultural societies.

With today's global cultural engagement, cultural diplomacy is going beyond a monopoly of governmental agencies and involves diverse stakeholders from the public sector, the business community, and civil society. With such a diversity of players involved in cultural engagement, the intercultural dialogue can be further enhanced with the noble aim of bringing *peaceful coexistence* between people of different race and religion – a mission which Malta has endeavoured to convey for several decades.

Culture can play an important role in foreign policy. Cultural cooperation can nurture dialogue, open-mindedness, and respect. Inter-cultural dialogue can help prevent conflicts and foster reconciliation between countries and religions. Culture can respond to global challenges such as the integration of refugees and radicalisation. It contributes to economic growth and provides the private sector with opportunities which could lead to better market opportunities.

I take this opportunity to express Malta's great sense of pride and satisfaction that its capital Valletta, together with all sixty-eight local councils in the country and the Dutch city of Leeuwarden will - as from January - take on the role of European Capital of Culture for a whole year. Malta will continue to seek to maximise on opportunities, such as this role of Valletta as European Capital of Culture in 2018, to strengthen this synergy as a means of developing a stronger sense of awareness and understanding among the diverse elements and stakeholders in the Mediterranean region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This 39th General Conference is being held at a crucial point in time when we are witnessing whole cultural patrimonies being destroyed and wiped out. Ongoing reports of terrorists and organised crime groups targeting cultural sites, especially in conflict zones, is not only worrying but deplorable. It has become highly apparent that, in certain conflict zones, cultural destruction is not incidental to the conflict but is being carried out systematically either on the basis of ideology or religion or to persecute by wiping out the identity and existence of distinctive communities. Sometimes it is done for pure greed or to finance their terrorist acts.

The recognition by the International Criminal Court that destruction of cultural heritage can constitute a war crime reinforces the fact that protection of cultural heritage is not only a cultural issue but also a security and humanitarian imperative.

Attacks on cultural heritage are not only targeting one particular group; they are a crime against the international community; a crime against our social fabric; a crime against what brings us together; a crime against world heritage. We cannot afford to allow specific cultural patrimonies to be irreparably lost.

I urge the international community to stand united. This is not a time to focus exclusively on our domestic agendas; it is the time to think about our common good. It is time to think about how we can make the organisation stronger. It is time to make our actions count.

Each and every country can do its part in this fight. Last February, in its capacity as rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of the current year, Malta convened the 4th meeting of the Informal Network of the Law Enforcement Authorities and Expertise Competent in the field of Cultural Goods (known as 'EU Cultnet'). This provided several Member States and stakeholders from different countries with the opportunity to come together and engage in discussions aimed at addressing cultural property crime more effectively.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Since its setting up, UNESCO has helped inspire organisations and individuals to pursue a higher ideal and improve the livelihood of a community, of a society, of a country, and of the world we live in. However, today, this is not enough. Countries, organisations, and people not only need inspiration to act; they also need to see a thirst for change for the better, a quest to reach higher ideals.

It is here that UNESCO cannot fail. With an ever-changing global community, UNESCO needs to continue to reform itself. It needs to reform itself to remain financially sound and organisationally solid so that it is capable of spreading its much-needed message in today's world.

UNESCO strives hard to ensure, among its member States, a sense of belonging to a greater community, sharing common goals for the common good. In numbers there is strength. No matter one's geographical size, united we can bring about change. United we can ensure that we stand to be counted.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Before I end my statement, I would like to express appreciation to Director-General Irina Bokova for her leadership, and for her closeness to Malta and its people. Madame Bokova has visited Malta several times and took deep and genuine interest not only in issues pertaining to heritage management and conservation but also in other important issues such as women's rights, education, and the quest for peace. I trust that her successor shall continue to build bridges and strengthen UNESCO to ensure that the organisation continues to stand up for the values that it so dearly represents.

