

Statement by Sweden at the Plenary Debate of the 39th session of UNESCO's General Conference

Delivered by H.E. Mr Gustav Fridolin, Minister for Education, Sweden.

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Madame President of the General Conference,

Mr. Chair of the Executive Board,

Madame Director-General,

Distinguished Delegates

It is an honour for me to address the 39th General Conference of UNESCO.

Sweden fully aligns itself with the EU statement.

In this challenging and unpredictable time, the United Nations is more important than ever – for sustainable development and for a more secure world. With its mandate, UNESCO has a key role to play.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement are proof of what we can achieve when we work together. For us who believe in multilateralism, these two truly global agreements create hope for a world where we solve common problems through cooperation. I am proud to announce that Sweden will provide 500 million USD to support the implementation of Agenda 2030 in partner countries.

Given the importance of UNESCO, it is deeply worrying that some Member States do not honour their financial commitments to UNESCO and the UN. The budget level in UNESCO is also worrying - it has remained largely the same for more than ten years, although UNESCO is given more tasks and responsibilities by its

Member States. UNESCO cannot continue to do more with fewer resources. The budgetary situation is a stern warning to all of us.

I am proud to be part of the first feminist government in the world. This means that the Swedish Government puts gender equality at the very top of our agenda.

We note that UNESCO is stepping up its work on Gender Equality in the next four year programme, including gender disaggregated data and budget tracking mechanisms. These measures will bring concrete results.

UNESCO has always supported Member States in putting high quality education at the centre stage of national policies. Sweden believes education for sustainable development, global citizenship education and comprehensive sexuality education are fundamental to achieve this. I am very pleased that Sweden is able to contribute to the financing of UNESCO's initiative Our Rights, Our Lives and Our Future on sexual reproductive health and rights, launched here tomorrow.

Madame President,

UNESCO's mandate to promote "the free flow of ideas" is more relevant than ever. Freedom of expression is a basic human right, and a fundamental part of democracy. The last few years have seen a negative development across the world: journalists, artists, elected officials and authors are increasingly threatened and attacked. Women journalists are worse off, often simply for being women. This has a chilling effect on the possibilities to express opinions, the role of journalists as public watchdogs and the public debate in general.

Today we celebrate the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists. It is unacceptable that journalists are threatened, jailed or killed for doing their job. This year's winner of UNESCO's World Press Freedom Prize, the imprisoned Swedish Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak, should be released.

UNESCO's leading role as coordinator of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity needs to be reinforced. I also urge Member States to translate the Plan into national strategies and practices.

We appreciate UNESCO's work to preserve cultural heritage and fight illicit trafficking of cultural goods and welcome the decision by the Hague International Criminal Court that crimes against cultural heritage are crimes against humanity.

Distinguished Colleagues,

Sweden's four year mandate on the Executive Board is coming to an end. During our mandate we have moved forward on issues such as freedom of expression and safety of journalists; artistic freedom, protection of cultural heritage in conflict; budget reform and financing dialogue; and the implementation of the Agenda 2030. As you hear, this remains Swedish priorities.

At this moment I would personally like to thank the outgoing Director-General Irina Bokova for her services. She has done much to bring UNESCO closer to the UN family and has been a strong advocate for freedom of expression and for gender equality among many things. Madame Bokova, I appreciate the work you have done for UNESCO and wish you the best in our continued struggle for common values.

Let me also take this opportunity to congratulate the nominated Director-General Audrey Azoulay and say that we look forward to be working together with her to make UNESCO even more "fit for purpose".

The founding ideas and principles of UNESCO are urgent. The Nordic countries are the kind of strong and close friends to the UN that the organisation needs. The engaged ones, the ones that never hesitate to be upfront and critical when needed but always are clear on our support for the special role UN needs to play in a world where we solve common problems together. It is important to have a Nordic voice

on UNESCO's Executive Board. Therefore, we hope Members States will support Finland's election to the Executive Board.

Thank you.