

Statement Netherlands – ExB 210

Mr. President,
Mme Director General,
Dear colleagues,

COVID-19 has us all in its grip. And although we all hope that the end of the pandemic is in sight, we know it may take many months before the whole world might reap the benefits of a widespread effective vaccine. I wanted to start this 210th session of UNESCO's Executive Board, with saying I look forward to meeting you all in person again, and to return to business as usual. Having said that, and since we cannot meet in person now, The Netherlands supports the efforts of the Members of the Board and the Secretariat to work virtually. There are many important issues waiting for our joined attention.

One of those important issues is Freedom of Expression. The Netherlands strongly believes Freedom of Expression, both online and offline is a prerequisite for a properly functioning democracy and a free society. Yet this freedom is under threat on a global scale.

I want to honor Samuel Paty, the teacher who taught his students about the importance of Freedom of Expression and consequently fell victim to a heinous act of terrorism not far from UNESCO's headquarters. We all owe him a debt of gratitude. The Netherlands remains committed to our obligations under international law to further the respect for human rights. We are guided by the common values of the EU, for the free word and against extremism and radicalism.

The Netherlands protects and promotes freedom of expression, online and offline, at home and around the world. We promote access to information and independent and pluralist media, with a particular focus on the position of women in and through the media.

Safety of journalists is a crucial element in upholding human rights, and is therefore a key component in the Dutch Human Rights Policy. However, journalists, whose work enables individuals to enjoy their right to information, are running growing risks of intimidation, violence, arbitrary detention and even death. Every year many journalists get killed, simply for doing their job. That is why the Netherlands remains a strong supporter of the work of UNESCO's Information and Communication sector.

On 9 and 10 December, the Netherlands has the honor of hosting the World Press Freedom Conference. The conference is timely. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to serve as a reminder of the importance of a free and independent press. People deserve access to impartial information, at all time.

The pandemic has also had a profound impact on the conference itself. This year, it cannot be the usual physical gathering for thousands of civil society, media, and government actors. However, together with Unesco we found the solutions that allow us to achieve the conference's goals. I am proud of the cooperation between UNESCO and the Netherlands, which has led to the adaption of the conference into an innovative digital format that allows

for the interaction that is so vital for an effective dialogue. We will have the stellar content that we have grown accustomed to. Maria Ressa, Christiane Amanpour, and many other amazing speakers have committed to participate. I do hope that you and your foreign ministers will join us in this virtual meeting. And finally yet importantly, allow me to thank the CI colleagues for their spirit of cooperation and high quality of work.

It's not only journalists we want to protect to do their work, but also artists. Artistic freedom is, like any form of freedom of expression, a fundamental, individual human right, and an essential prerequisite for the peaceful, prosperous development of humanity and society. Free, uncensored artistic and creative expression cultivate the human spirit and is critical to the development of vibrant cultures as well as to the functioning of democratic societies.

Another important issue I want to raise are women's rights and gender equality. Where women and men have equal opportunities and equal access to for instance education and information, not only women and girls but also their families and their communities thrive. It is the responsibility of all of us to keep working on gender equality, by keeping it high on the multilateral agenda and by creating the right conditions in our countries. The Netherlands will remain an outspoken defender of Gender Equality as a global priority for UNESCO.

COVID-19 has left a mark on the education sector. The success of achieving the SDG-4 depends highly on how we respond to the current COVID-19 pandemic. It requires a firm commitment to investing in inclusive, equitable & quality education and lifelong learning. It also requires a strong global education cooperation mechanism. We expect UNESCO to take the lead in this endeavor. The NL advocates an innovative and practical approach to rethinking education. By addressing the digital divide in education, by investing in skills development, by making sure that no one is left behind.

As a member of both the intangible cultural heritage committee and of the trade in cultural goods committee the Netherlands remains an active supporter of UNESCO's role in safeguarding cultural heritage.

Lastly, I want to mention the issue of the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. The new Recommendation, which UNESCO is currently preparing, is a unique opportunity to set the first global standard in this field. AI will have such a strong impact on our lives in the years to come, that it urgently needs a global framework to ensure that AI is applied ethically and that its impact is beneficial and fair for our citizens and for the planet. UNESCO is the Agency to coordinate that global cooperation. I thank the new ADG Social and Human Science Gabriela Ramos for her support on the gender aspect of this important debate.

Mister chair, madam director-general, esteemed colleagues; we remain a strong supporter of rotation in the Board and consider our seat a rotating responsibility we proudly share with Belgium and Luxembourg. As a member of the Board we also reflect the diversity of all the countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands: Aruba, Curacao, Sint-Maarten, and The Netherlands.

Thank you mister chair.