

Mr. Chairperson,
Madame Director-General,
Mr. President of the General Conference,

The Philippines extends its condolences to the government and people of France on the demise of its former president.

The 75th anniversary of UNESCO and the United Nations come at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of our common humanity. All our peoples and economies are suffering and in need of healing and recovery. Even the richest and largest countries have been severely affected. More than ever, now is the time for international solidarity and cooperation.

COVID19 reminds us that a robust and effective multilateral system is essential to overcoming the continuing challenges of promoting peace, security and sustainable development.

The Philippines extends its sympathies to all those who have been targeted by terrorism and extremism in recent months, particularly victims in Afghanistan, Austria and France. As we work together to combat hate and racism, we underscore the importance of Global Citizenship Education towards building inclusive multicultural societies.

On the occasion of this 210th Executive Board session, the Philippines would like to share its views on current UNESCO priorities.

The pandemic has aggravated existing inequalities and divides. If we do not together step up our resolve, there is a risk that these gaps shall further widen and turn back the clock on the SDGs. Foremost is the digital divide. Many schools remain closed and conduct classes online. Learners and educators alike, especially in the developing countries, are not fully equipped to manage this paradigm shift. In the Philippines, there is a story of a grandfather who built a tree house for his grandchild in the mountains to access a stronger internet signal.

Capacity-building and support must be rendered to countries to help their educational systems adapt to the new normal. While we welcome the recent Global Education Meeting Declaration, we believe efforts must be scaled up. The Global Education Coalition, whose terms of reference we have yet to examine, could launch more initiatives to provide stable and free internet access to learners in remote and priority areas.

In a related manner, the 2030 Education Steering Committee can be made more fit-for-purpose and effective. It is not fulfilling its potential to make a difference in global SDG4 implementation and support. We call on the member countries of the Steering Committee to begin a reflection on the future of the Steering Committee and means to improve its impact and governance.

In the science sector, we hope the draft recommendation that UNESCO is elaborating on open science shall result in concrete benefits for developing countries -- to ensure their access to crucial research and innovative technologies. This is the only way to measure the effectiveness of such an instrument.

Likewise, for the draft recommendation on the ethics of AI -- it must open doors so that developing countries can benefit from and develop their own AI technologies. If not, even more will be left behind; and we risk perpetuating another great divide, between those who design and control the algorithms, and those who are used as digital data farms.

In the field of culture, the Philippines is partnering with UNESCO to safeguard intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, particularly natural disasters. We thank Switzerland for the extra-budgetary support to a pilot project under the 2003 Convention. As one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, in the direct path of numerous devastating typhoons each year, the Philippines has much to share on this topic.

We are also embarking on a pilot project with UNESCO to test at local and national levels indicators on the impact of culture on sustainable development, and highly appreciate Spain's extra-budgetary support.

On safety of journalists, earlier this year there was a landmark conviction in the Philippines against 44 individuals found guilty for their involvement in a heinous crime against journalists. This was a milestone for the Philippine judicial system and the rule of law following a very arduous process, and highlights the government's continuing determination to bring those responsible to full justice in accordance with domestic laws and applicable international standards.

In conclusion, the Philippines wishes to see a more united UNESCO, one which can rise above the political fragmentation we are witnessing. There is an urgent need to build greater trust and respectful dialogue in this house meant to be the intellectual and moral beacon of the UN system. It does not reflect well on us that the Board has been at such loggerheads to agree on dates and modalities for its meetings during the pandemic.

We wish to thank the President of the General Conference for his efforts to broker a way forward on the important issue of term-limits and encourage colleagues to engage in a more open, honest, and committed manner with a view to achieving a just and lasting outcome.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.