

TO CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the third meeting of the High-Level Group
of the Alliance of Civilizations

Dakar, Senegal, 30 May 2006

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address this third meeting of the High-Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations. I would like to begin by saying how delighted I am to be associated with such an important endeavour and to be able to contribute to your deliberations, drawing on and sharing with you the considerable body of expertise that UNESCO has assembled in this increasingly pivotal field. This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to participate personally in your discussions, although UNESCO, through the involvement of Ms Katérina Stenou, contributed to the second meeting in Doha.

UNESCO fully shares the Alliance's concerns about the need to foster greater mutual respect among different cultural and religious groups and to counteract the rise of extremism. The quest for dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples is deeply entrenched in UNESCO's Constitution. The purpose of the Organization is to build 'peace in the minds of men', and the promotion of mutual understanding of, and respect for, cultural and religious diversity forms a central part of this mandate. Developments over the past years have made the need for dialogue ever more topical, if not compelling. There is today a palpable willingness to move beyond words to practical action, both in order to counter the upsurge in intolerance and fanaticism, but also to build on the many new opportunities that globalization has created for intercultural exchange and understanding and for combating the 'clash of ignorances'.

In this context, it was encouraging to see the establishment last year of the Alliance of Civilizations. The initiative is a strong sign of the growing preoccupation at the highest political levels with the strategic importance of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue for the pursuit of peace. It marks one of a series of recent steps taken to enhance international cooperation in this area. These steps include UNESCO's General Conference Resolution of October 2001, which, in the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September, underlined the importance of dialogue in international efforts to prevent and eradicate acts of terrorism.

A further significant step was taken one month later, with the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. The Resolution was adopted at the end of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. UNESCO was given the lead to implement the Global Agenda for Dialogue, and over the last five years, in close collaboration with its Member States, the Organization has been implementing a series of practical initiatives to promote mutual respect and understanding among civilizations. The Global Agenda and its Programme of Action remain highly relevant, as is reflected in its strong endorsement by Heads of State in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.

Additional recent steps comprise, most notably, the Rabat Commitment on fostering dialogue among cultures and civilizations through concrete and sustained initiatives, which UNESCO adopted in June 2005 along with ISESCO, ALESCO and other important international partners.

Since its launch last July, I have been following the work of the Alliance with great interest. It is pleasing to observe that the recommendations that its High-Level Group has

been developing – and which were presented here this morning – closely echo the directions that I have been receiving from UNESCO's Executive Board. I see, in particular, a common emphasis on the need to translate our shared commitment to dialogue into concrete actions.

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Let me briefly outline some of the activities that UNESCO has developed in its efforts to move towards more practical action. Guided by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution and the recommendations adopted in Rabat last June, UNESCO and its Member States have formulated an inter-sectoral action-oriented plan aimed at promoting dialogue through all of its main programmes. Time forbids going into this plan in any detail here. Instead, I would like to offer some examples of concrete action in the fields of education, culture and the media – fields that I know have been central to the High-Level Group's discussions over the past two days. I hope that these examples will provide a source of reflection in the ongoing deliberations of the Group. Beyond this, they might help us to identify areas where UNESCO can link its work to the forward-looking action plan being developed by the Alliance of Civilizations.

Education, as you have recognized, is a key vehicle for dialogue. Quality education can contribute to stabilizing conflicts, eliminating cultural stereotypes, and building understanding and mutual respect for other religions and cultures. Language policies have, in this regard, an important role to play. Multilingualism, for example, is one way of stimulating intercultural dialogue and enabling learners to actively participate in today's global society. High quality learning materials and pedagogical approaches that promote tolerance, social cohesion and respect for human rights are also crucial, and they need to be adapted to both formal and non-formal educational contexts.

Curriculum reform is another essential issue. UNESCO has long been engaged in developing processes of curriculum renewal and adaptation that take into account intercultural issues and promote ways of learning to live together in peace. To be effective, this must be combined with national book policies that provide equitable access to textbooks and reading materials, as well as international leadership in orchestrating the bilateral and multilateral revision of such materials. Greater regional and international cooperation in this – and in other areas such as teacher training, publishing and university capacity-building – will be instrumental in realizing the potential of education to promote dialogue and intercultural understanding.

UNESCO's core mandate is also to promote the 'fruitful diversity of cultures' and its corollary, the dialogue within and between each culture and civilization. In this context, the preservation of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is of the utmost significance. The origins of heritage are multifarious and interrelated. Through actively seeking to highlight the many different influences that have shaped the history and identity of our heritage, we can help to promote dialogue, exchange and understanding between communities and peoples, and especially among youth. Successful initiatives such as UNESCO's 'World Heritage in Young Hands' have revealed heritage to be a common denominator and unifying factor for cooperation and reconciliation. Cultural festivals, sports events, cultural fora, art and book fairs are further potential vehicles for dialogue and understanding.

The mass media can provide another effective vehicle for creating and bolstering dialogue, although, as the 'cartoons crisis' shows, it is essential that media professionals act according to the highest professional and ethical standards. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are vital to cultural dialogue and must be defended as indispensable elements of democratic societies. However, like other freedoms and rights, they must be exercised in accordance with respect for moral and religious convictions. As I have frequently affirmed: freedom and respect are two principles on which we cannot compromise. They are complementary, not mutually exclusive, as was recognized by UNESCO's Executive Board in April this year.

It is vital, therefore, to promote discussion by journalists and their professional associations on voluntary media codes of conduct. Strategies that have proved particularly effective include setting up joint broadcast programmes, newspapers and websites by journalists from different cultural backgrounds. Such strategies have the greatest impact when they are accompanied with specialized training courses on cross-cultural journalism and multicultural reporting. Specific training also needs to be provided to media professionals in conflict situations, where fair and balanced media coverage has the potential to build bridges between different ethnic, religious and cultural groups. Furthermore, as well as addressing the challenges posed by conflicts and extremism, it is at the same time necessary to encourage intensified media coverage of dialogue-related issues, and events or sites that give expression to the cultural diversity of humankind.

Furthermore, and in all our activities, it is important to harness the capacity of ICTs. Web-based dialogue forums, interactive discussion and chat-rooms, videogames with a 'conflict-sensitive' profile: these are just some of the many ways in which modern media can be used to establish dialogue, especially among younger segments of the population.

The overriding aim of these activities is to build an independent, pluralistic and professional media. It is to sponsor open and critical discussion within societies, and to encourage sensitive reflection on the implications of cultural and religious diversity in today's world.

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The challenge before us is vast and complex, and can only be met through concerted actions at all levels of society. It is therefore essential to enlist new partners, beyond the representatives of government and academia with whom we usually interact. In developing our plans of action, our policy dialogue must become much more inclusive. We need to draw into our discussions civil society organizations, the private sector, local communities, as well as religious and faith leaders. We must also reach out to other levels of leadership, building alliances with those leaders capable and willing to engage in genuine intercultural dialogue. It is important, in particular, to systematically engage women and youth in our deliberations. The High-Level Group has highlighted the urgency of promoting tolerance and respect among youth. It is also necessary to recognize the strategic role that young people can play in building bridges between civilizations, as well as the need to reach out to young people through their own interests and activities. Sport and popular culture, for example, can create significant opportunities for interaction and dialogue.