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Address by
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Mr Chairman,
Dr Töpfer, my dear colleague and Executive Director of UNEP,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address this closing meeting of the 21st session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme. I am most grateful to Dr Töpfer for his invitation to participate in this ministerial-level Global Environmental Forum. Since I took office, I have made a point of establishing strong and confident working relations with all institutions of the United Nations system. Dr Töpfer and I have met on several occasions and I appreciate the cordiality and effectiveness of our interaction. I notably had the pleasure to welcome Dr Töpfer in Paris last September to discuss with him common issues and concerns and ways of further improving cooperation between our two organizations.

It is now almost ten years since, at the Earth Summit in Rio, the leaders of the world's nations made significant commitments towards an environmental protection fully compatible with improved social equity and sustainable development. Agenda 21 was a complex but necessary patchwork of interweaving policies to promote these concerns coherently.

A decade on, it is recognized, to say the least, that we have not done what we all undertook to do. Many countries now do have national policies for environmental protection and sustainable development. Great efforts have been made in the UN system. Yet notwithstanding all this, the Earth's environment has deteriorated further, and the gap between rich and poor has widened, within and between nations. It is nothing short of scandalous that at the beginning of the 21st century 800 million human beings should still go hungry every day and lack the basic skills of reading and writing.

Insufficient political will and, at times, hesitant citizen involvement are important parts of the whole problem. International public awareness is uneven. But to pause at that is to stop short of the whole picture. Such shortcomings in themselves betray the need for greater efforts in favour of education and information. We must therefore go much further to mobilize all those who have a stake in sustainable development, and this includes the public at large. Which means providing accurate and scientifically viable information and disseminating it at all levels. We must massively increase public awareness. The purpose of my presence here is to stress how important it is for UNESCO and UNEP to work together to assist the international community and our Member States in meeting these immediate and urgent challenges. The

forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 is fast approaching, and we cannot afford to miss this second opportunity to mobilize in the fight for a healthy planet. We cannot shirk our responsibilities. And this, of course, includes taking a long, hard look at our economic systems and lifestyles.

We know that addressing the challenge of sustainable development will require deep-seated changes in our ways of thinking and acting. As we see it in UNESCO, the shift has profound implications for science. We must cope with increasing complexity, break down traditional disciplinary barriers, design research to be relevant to policy-making, rethink education at all levels, and communicate scientific information to non-technical user groups. Most important, we need a greater input of science into environmental policy-making, both in terms of quality and quantity.

More than ever, we must share knowledge and sound scientific information more widely. It is clear today that we cannot even begin to understand current changes in climate without knowledge of the hydrological cycle and the role of the world's oceans. And it is also clear that we need to know far more about biodiversity's role in the functioning of ecosystems, and about plants and animals and their value for human life itself. This, of course, is where UNESCO has its own key role to play with regard to the vital environmental dimension of sustainable development, in concert with UNEP's efforts.

UNESCO, through its major long-standing intergovernmental scientific programmes, will continue to work towards strengthening the scientific basis for the environment's protection and for sustainable use of nature's resources. Ever since they were established, these programmes – the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, the International Hydrological Programme, the Man and the Biosphere Programme and the International Geological Correlation Programme – have yielded rich data, accumulated considerable expertise and contributed to train a large number of specialists.

However, our capacity to address environmental problems and move towards sustainable development still remains woefully inadequate. Hence, in the areas covered by UNESCO's scientific programmes – biodiversity and terrestrial ecosystems, oceans, coastal zones, freshwater, earth crust and natural hazards – the Organization is reviewing its cooperation with governments, the scientific community and its UN system partners, notably UNEP. We must ensure that such cooperation is effective and relevant.

When taking up my duties as Director-General of UNESCO, I launched the Organization on a series of reforms. This included refocusing of its programmes. In this context, and upon my proposal to our Executive Board, water and supporting ecosystems have been identified as the principal priority for the Organization's action in the natural sciences for the next biennium (2002-2003).

As you all know, water-related problems are multiplying all over the world. Water is scarce and very unevenly distributed around the planet. Nearly a quarter of humanity does not enjoy direct access to drinking water. Scientific and technological failure to remedy this situation makes the prospect of a global water crisis very real. UNESCO is committed to a proactive, integrated and multidisciplinary approach to the problem of managing water resources, by combining approaches at once social, scientific, environmental and political. In cooperation with other concerned agencies, UNESCO's freshwater arm, the International Hydrological Programme will, in particular, focus in the coming years on water's interactions not only with the biosphere – including oceans – but with the whole social system, with a view to minimizing risks related to water security: a key challenge for the 21st century world.

UNESCO and UNEP have closely collaborated ever since UNEP was founded, primarily in environmental sciences, including global earth observing systems, and in environmental education. UNESCO has 50 years of experience in international environmental science programmes, and has promoted environmental education since the early 1970s. For its part, UNEP works on the global environmental agenda, and coordinates the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the UN system. UNESCO accordingly welcomed the recent establishment of the Environment Management Group, and was pleased to participate in its first meeting a couple of weeks ago.

The framework is provided by the new UN system-wide World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP), which I personally launched and announced at the closing ceremony of the Ministerial Conference of the 2nd World Water Forum held a year ago in The Hague. Building on the expertise available in its long-standing International Hydrological Programme, UNESCO provides the Secretariat for WWAP and takes the lead in its implementation in close cooperation with ACC members.

WWAP brings together the 23 UN agencies and bodies concerned with freshwater issues, in response to a recommendation by the Commission on Sustainable Development. WWAP already actively cooperates with other UN-based initiatives such as the Global International Waters Assessment of UNEP,

in order to maximize synergy. Freshwater has thus become an excellent example of the reinforced UNESCO-UNEP cooperation I seek to achieve.

WWAP's main contribution will be the biennial World Water Development Report, the first issue of which should be published in 2003 in time for the World Water Forum to be held in Japan. WWAP will help promote sound policy decisions for sustainable use of freshwater resources, thereby warding off possible causes of conflict. It will focus on promoting management decisions designed to alleviate poverty and to ensure economic development, food security and the health of human populations, while preserving vital ecosystems. UNESCO is proud of its determining role in forging cooperation between its partners in the UN system.

Through its Man and the Biosphere Programme, and more precisely its World Network of Biosphere Reserves, which include some 400 sites in 94 countries, UNESCO moreover works with the Convention on Biological Diversity under the aegis of UNEP to promote what has been called the ecosystem approach, as the best tool for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use. UNESCO's action towards integrated management of land and water will be reinforced in the coming years, along the lines of the ecosystem approach.

UNESCO also takes pride in its World Heritage Convention, which aims to protect the world's most prestigious natural sites and cultural monuments. Among the 690 such sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, 160 are natural. Some of them are outstandingly important for their biodiversity. This is the case, for example, of the Galapagos islands, so recently soiled by an oil spill. This pristine archipelago has long been a major destination for tourists interested in nature. In this regard, I am pleased to note that very rewarding cooperation on the specific issue of ecological tourism at world heritage sites has been launched in conjunction with UNEP.

Capacity-building with regard to renewable energies, particularly in developing countries, is another area for UNESCO-UNEP cooperation. The framework provided for this cooperation is the World Solar Programme which, despite its name, focuses on all forms of renewable energy sources including geothermal ones. I will say more on this matter tomorrow at the Dialogue in the Field on Renewable Energy Technologies: Potential for Africa. Let me just say here that investment in renewable energy resources remains very insufficient, although these are the most environmentally sound sources of energy, and given that more than one billion people in rural areas of developing countries remain without basic energy services. UNESCO's activities concentrate on the

education of users and training of engineers, technicians and planners, as well as on the promotion of solar energy for schools, local radios, and the like.

Education and capacity-building in environment-related issues is a tremendous task. Without informed citizens throughout the world, the political will to solve the problems we face will simply not be strong enough. As you know, UNESCO has been given leading responsibility in this field in Agenda 21 as inter-agency task manager of Chapter 36 on education for sustainable development. In this context, we also undertake specific tasks on environmental education within the framework of two main conventions, the Convention on Desertification and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In the field of biodiversity, UNESCO has been mandated by the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity to design, launch and coordinate a Global Initiative on Biodiversity Education and Public Awareness. We have therefore developed a strategy and a programme of work that will be implemented with governments and major institutional partners in the field. At the recent meeting of the Environment Management Group, which you yourself chaired, Dr Töpfer, UNESCO agreed to take the lead in common UN system-wide activities on education and training related to environment. We are very pleased at the renewed interest in environmental education shown by our partner organizations in the UN system. Such a welcome attitude will help all stakeholders recognize the essential role of education in furthering efforts to implement Agenda 21, and move towards sustainable development.

Education and information are crucial, and through stronger UNEP-UNESCO cooperation, I hope it will be possible to encourage, on the national level, much greater interaction between ministries responsible for education and those overseeing environmental affairs. Too many bureaucratic partitions separate ministerial responsibilities. If we are to achieve anything meaningful in this race against time, we must combine our efforts and not allow ourselves to be held back by such artificial walls.

UNESCO stands at the crossroads of science, culture, education and communication. This is why our Organization believes that it is so vital to promote comprehensive, holistic approaches to environment and sustainable development. Environmental policy-makers need to pay special attention to the specific socio-economic and cultural context of the country concerned. This is true for the definition of national and local policies, as well as for the design of technical cooperation projects in developing countries, taking full account of the human resources available in the country.

Mr Chairman, in conclusion, let me reaffirm my full commitment to putting UNESCO's strength in the sciences, culture and education, to work with UNEP and other partners in the UN system, as well as with governments, the scientific and educational communities, NGOs, media and civil society at large: to enhance environmental protection and preserve our life support systems. To this end, we must ensure full success for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, that it may result in political will, and positive action.

Thank you.