

DG/2001/22
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Koichiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the “Dialogue in the field” event,
UNEP Governing Council

Renewable Energy Technologies: Potential for Africa

Naivasha, Kenya, 10 February 2001

Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Dr Töpfer, Mr Executive Director of UNEP, my dear colleague,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by saying how deeply gratified I am to be with you today in this beautiful setting at the start of a field visit which will, I am sure, attest to the value of “dialogue in the field” on the potential of renewable energies for Africa.

UNESCO has, like other bodies in the United Nations system, assigned priority to Africa in its activities.

Africa needs energy for its future development, but, with few exceptions, not many African countries enjoy the fossil fuel resources – basically coal, oil and gas – needed to meet the foreseeable increase in energy demand. Africa, however, is blessed with abundant solar radiation. Moreover, many African countries have great potential in biomass, wind and small hydro and geothermal resources. These have the great advantage of being sources of environment-friendly energies.

Yesterday, when I addressed the Governing Council of UNEP, I referred to water resources and ecosystems as one of the five principal priorities in the programme of UNESCO for 2002-2003. Today I wish to speak of UNESCO’s work in promoting renewable, environment-friendly sources of energy.

While energy is of course essential for economic and social development, the way that we produce this energy – mostly by burning fossil and non-renewable materials – has many negative consequences. These endanger our environment, modify the climate and affect the health and the quality of life of millions of people around the world. As we enter the third millennium, some 2 billion people are still estimated to have no regular access to basic energy services like electricity. Obviously, when almost 40% of the planet’s population, who mainly live in rural or isolated areas of the developing world, lack reliable means to light and heat their homes, clinics and schools, this acts as a significant brake on development. Here in Africa you know very well that, in such areas, people – mostly women and children - are often forced to make long daily journeys to fetch drinking water and fuelwood. Renewable energies, including renewable energy electrification, would help meet the needs of these rural populations not only in terms of light, heat and pumped purified water, but also regarding their educational opportunities, basic communications and medical care. Available energy generates jobs and income and improves agricultural

methods and techniques: in short, all the facilities and services that a healthy and prosperous community needs.

With these considerations in mind, UNESCO took the initiative, back in 1993, to launch a process to secure high-level political support for the promotion of renewable energies, culminating in 1996 in the World Solar Summit held in Harare, Zimbabwe. This process benefited from the guidance of the World Solar Commission, a body composed of 15 Heads of State or Government from developing and industrialized countries alike. The results of this Summit were the adoption of the Harare Declaration on Solar Energy and Sustainable Development and the preparation of the World Solar Programme 1996-2005. This ten-year Programme contains a series of recommendations for actions to be taken at the national and international levels in order to attain the objectives set forth in the Harare Declaration. It also includes global, regional and national renewable energy projects to be implemented as a joint effort of governments, the organizations and programmes of the United Nations system, as well as other stakeholders, both public and private. Many of the national projects included in the World Solar Programme are from African countries.

I should like to stress that UNESCO initiated the World Solar Programme as an instrument to serve the world community by promoting renewable energies and disseminating the relevant technology. In fact, UNESCO here really promotes efforts that fall within its constitutional mandate. The purpose is to inform, educate and even mobilize the public in favour of renewable energies, and help capacity-building through the training of engineers and technicians. A new and eventually sustainable global energy system will not only increase exploitation of renewable sources of energy, but also require endogenous scientific capacities. This means increased local knowledge of the various technologies to make them adaptable in different contexts and fields of application. This is where the importance of UNESCO's educational role lies.

Both the General Conference of UNESCO and the General Assembly of the United Nations have endorsed on several occasions the World Solar Programme as an important contribution towards attaining a general objective of sustainable development. On the initiative of the Chairman of the World Solar Commission, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and with the sponsorship of the Group of 77 and China as well as a number of other countries, the UN General Assembly in its last three sessions adopted resolutions supporting the World Solar Programme, calling in particular for wider inter-agency efforts in the UN system to implement the Programme.

In this context I am pleased to announce that Dr Töpfer and I have agreed to enhance cooperation between UNEP and UNESCO to promote renewable

environment-friendly energies. UNEP is working to address global energy issues at both the policy and technical levels, and actively supports the establishment of sustainable energy systems. UNESCO is more oriented towards the scientific and technological basis of renewable energy issues, notably training, and information/communication. Needless to say, Dr Töpfer and I also aim to strengthen our collaboration in search of sustainable energy systems with the other relevant organizations and programmes of the United Nations system. Such a collective concerted effort on sustainable energy will undoubtedly have a direct bearing on the protection of the environment and on international environmental agreements, in particular the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol.

In preparing UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy for the coming six years I have proposed poverty eradication as a cross-cutting strategy for all programme sectors of the Organization. This is, of course, one of the overriding objectives of the whole United Nations system. It is not surprisingly linked in particular to the availability of energy at affordable prices in developing countries. The installation in rural areas of decentralized electricity systems using renewable energies can contribute, in no small measure, first to reduce, later to eradicate, poverty in these areas, without endangering the environment.

Let me conclude by stressing once again that there is scope to strengthen cooperation between UNEP and UNESCO in general and, more specifically, in promoting energy services for the rural populations of Africa. Both our organizations have already prepared and implemented renewable energy and energy efficiency projects and programmes in support of sustainable energy in Africa. I am confident that, working together, we will greatly increase the services our two Organizations can render to countries around the world and in Africa in particular.

Thank you for your attention.