

The Abuja Statement

“The International Congress on Dialogue of Civilization, Religion and Cultures in West Africa” held in Abuja (Nigeria) from 15-17 December 2003, is the first UNESCO attempt to root dialogue in its diverse forms in Africa. The Congress follows many similar initiatives in areas such as the Mediterranean Basin and Central Asia.

Dialogue is understood as a unique way to foster peace among different communities belonging to various cultural, ethnic and religious walks of life, that compose the main wealth, cradle to many civilizations which interacted and enriched one another during centuries until the present days. This Civilization spread to many parts of the world, mostly the Americas, because of the Slave trade. However, despite this tragedy, which deserves to be better known and taught, the African culture and spirituality blended with other cultures and enriched them profoundly.

The personalities, among them the secretary to the Government of the federation who represented representative of the President of Nigeria and the Minister of Culture and Tourism, as well as participants from different countries and agencies of the United Nations system, acknowledged that it is only through dialogue, reconciliation, mediation and reciprocal knowledge and mutual understanding that conflicts can be prevented and resolved.

They recognized the deep impact of spiritual leaders in their communities and encourage them to work jointly for the well- being of communities and individuals, regardless of their origins and background, promote equality between women and men, human rights and address issues such as the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. For these purposes, the creation of local Inter-religious Dialogue Councils, NGOs or Associations have to be encouraged in their grassroots activities and should be UNESCOs partners in the field.

The participants worked in a spirit of brotherhood and understanding, sharing their experiences and good practices. Furthermore, they were able to freely express their convictions and viewpoints. They agreed that UNESCO is a neutral forum and it should continue its efforts in promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue. In the light of the international and regional context, Dialogue among cultures and religions should be a beacon Programme of the United Nations system, in particular UNESCO, with the aim of building peace in the minds of men, such as specified in the preamble of its constitution.

It was felt very important to recognize a set of shared values that link all humankind in their diversity, considered as an asset, rather than a threat to identities, which are, essentially, as the West African example demonstrates, multiple, given the strong proximity of the different communities and mixed families.

The religious leaders and participants of the Congress strongly stated that their beliefs and practices should not be manipulated or misinterpreted for political or ethnic purposes. These beliefs and practices, which are part of ancient civilizations and cultures and the foundation of the daily lives of the populations in West Africa, should not be stereotyped nor lead to amalgams. The spiritual leaders of all denominations present in Abuja wish to convey a common message of peace, justice and solidarity to mankind.

Religious leaders alongside decision makers, be they academic or political, express their willingness to work together for the reconciliation of their communities, in particular, those who live in situations of war and inter-ethnic, inter-religious or intra-religious tension or conflicts. They are aware that ignorance and mistrust of the “other” may be conducive to extremist attitudes,

ranging from entrenched identities to the rejection of the “other” and even to open fanaticism based on the idea that his/her belief is the only truth. Religious Leaders shall stand for life and teach that their Sacred Teachings condemn every act of killing in the name of the messages and values they uphold.

A change of mentality and behavioral pattern should be brought about, far beyond tolerance, by promoting dialogue among believers belonging to various denominations and non-believers alike, since humanistic values transcend all boundaries and all are equally committed to common good.

Moreover, the religious leaders, together with other partners, wish to work, not only for the spiritual well being of their communities but also for goals such as poverty alleviation and the eradication of HIV/AIDS in human rights and cultural approach.

In this regard, reciprocal knowledge and respect should be strongly promoted through an appropriate education whereby children and youth learn to live together respectful of each other’s differences while recognizing what they have in common. In order to achieve this aim, a UNESCO Chair on Intercultural and Inter-religious dialogue is desirable, which could be part of an UNITWIN network of chairs in this field, being created in all continents.

In order to ensure a continuation to this fruitful discussion, the participants wish to recommend the following:

- To create “Inter-religious Dialogue Council” within the UN System is needed, as well as, at the continental level Inter-religious Dialogue Council within the AU and ECOWAS. Such councils will promote and implement inter-religious dialogue on concrete issues.
- To encourage national and regional networks for a common Interfaith action, including the fight against HIV/AIDS.
- To bring together high profile persons and people coming from different walks of life, in order to share knowledge and wisdom.
- To recognize the religious leaders, including the traditional ones, in their role of mediators in preventing or solving conflicts and in the fight against HIV/AIDS.
- To encourage the training of religious leaders to learn about other religious traditions. This sort of teaching may prove to be an efficient to against fanaticism, prejudices and stereotypes.
- To declare a joint war against HIV/AIDS, a common enemy attacking and killing all human beings
- To mobilize religious leadership in order to fight HIV /AIDS related stigma and discrimination and support people infected and affected.
- To reinforce capacities of Faith Leaders and communities at all levels, in order to build effective prevention and care.
- To use contextual methods of counseling and prevention adapted to local realities and cultures.
- To encourage the use of religious media channels to transmit messages of compassion, solidarity and tolerance.
- To ensure better participation of women and youth at all levels (including decision making) through formal, non-formal and peer education.
- To map potential areas of tension or conflict before they occur in order to prevent them.
- To foster reciprocal knowledge through the design and production of pedagogical tools including NTCs and the encouragement for setting up UNESCO Chairs on Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue in Africa, mainly in West Africa.

- To encourage traditional expressions such as music, drama, and oral stories for a better understanding among the various African communities.

In conclusion, the participants wish to express their gratitude to the Government of Nigeria, in particular to the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, extended to all its team, to the Secretary-General of the General Conference of UNESCO for his full support, for all the officers of the UNESCO Office in Abuja and to the UNESCO Secretariat in Headquarters, Paris, Division for Cultural policies and Intercultural Dialogue – in the framework of the Inter-religious Dialogue Programme - for the successful accomplishment of the Congress, which, it was considered by all as an important step in raising awareness to the urgent need of addressing the issue of reconstruction and reconciliation through a more pro-active attitude in handling potential situations of conflict rather than reacting to them when they occur, hindering sustainable development and bringing mistrust among populations . They all express their willingness to extend this initiative to other parts of Africa and deepen this dialogue targeting specific publics such as youth, women, marginalized populations, mainly, victims of conflicts and all those who suffer from HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

Abuja, 17 December 2003