

**“EURASIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY – DIALOGUE OF CULTURES
OR CONFLICT OF CIVILIZATIONS?”**

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Background paper

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1. Introduction

Today, all societies, including those in Eurasia, have to cope with new economic and political challenges as well as with the need to further develop their social and cultural conditions.

In the face of new and multidimensional threats to global peace and security, the concept of a “Dialogue among Civilization” has assumed ever greater salience. In past years, and especially since the tragic events of 11 September 2001, activities promoting dialogue among cultures and civilizations have attracted renewed attention at the highest political levels throughout the world.

Subsequent to the global observance of 2001 as United Nations Year for the Dialogue among Civilizations – launched by UNESCO on the eve of the Millennium Summit in New York -, and the UN General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 21 November 2001 adopting the UN Global Agenda for the Dialogue among Civilisations,, UNESCO has intensified its own activities in this domain. New impetus was provided by the adoption of 31 C/Resolution 39 on the fight against terrorism by the General Conference in November 2001, which affirmed, among others that dialogue “constitutes a fundamental challenge based on the unity of humankind and commonly shared values, the recognition of cultural diversity and the equal dignity of each civilization and each culture”.

More recently, two important events have provided the Organizations with renewed orientation for the dialogue in future: the international ministerial conference “Dialogue among Civilizations – Quest for New Perspectives”, held in New Delhi on 9 and 10 July 2003 and “The Regional Forum on the Dialogue among Civilizations”, held in Ohrid, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, on 29 and 30 August 2003.

Based on the outcomes of these two events, on 16 October 2003, the General Conference of UNESCO unanimously adopted a landmark resolution (Resolution 47), which endorsed the “New Delhi Declaration” and the “Message from Ohrid”.

For its part, UNESCO has welcomed and supported manifold initiatives and actions by governments, international organizations, the academic community, religious and spiritual leaders, the private sector, actors of civil society and individuals aimed at carrying forward and invigorating the dialogue among cultures and civilizations. The Forum “Eurasia in the 21st Century – Dialogue of Cultures or Conflict of Civilizations?” to be held in Issyk-Kul (Kyrgyzstan) on 10 and 11 June 2004 provides another welcome occasion to focus on this important issue in a concrete regional and interregional context.

A central objective of the Forum will be to define practical measures and modalities for the implementation of the recommendations of the New Delhi and Ohrid conferences at the regional level, and to formulate future approaches for UNESCO and other relevant actors. Guided by the precepts of tolerance and intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue, the Issyk-Kul Forum will address the

following topics in Eurasia, characterised as it is by multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies:

- Shared values, ethical principles and human rights – the cornerstone of every dialogue;
- Cultural diversity and heritage: a shared experience, a font for identities and a tool for reconciliation;
- Water and sustainable development – promoting peaceful cooperation and developing synergies through dialogue involving the natural sciences;
- The impact of integration processes on inter-ethnic and inter-faith relationships and on the emergence and reinforcement of tolerance;
- New paradigms of education in the context of dialogue among civilizations, especially through the pursuit of the six Education for All (EFA) goals;
- The role of international organizations in helping to prevent the occurrence of conflicts at the sub-regional and regional levels.

The Conference will seek to advance the emergence and articulation of a model of integration for civilizational development in Eurasia.

2. The challenge of dialogue

Over the past years, UNESCO has been involved in broadening the scope of dialogue making it more relevant to contemporary challenges. The concept of a dialogue among civilizations has been reviewed and assessed with a view to identifying obstacles to dialogue, including old and new ignorances and prejudices, which can lead to new fractures and conflicts especially at local community levels. An opposition to the vision of a future world characterized by anarchy and conflict lies at the core of this effort.

It could be argued that civilizations may intermingle as well as may be in conflict, but it is obvious that neither “clash of civilizations” which exaggerates “difference” and “division” nor the assumption of “civilization” as a homogenous integral and coherent unity do not correspond to a lived reality in the contemporary world of vivid interpenetration of cultural experience and practice everywhere.

In this situation, the challenge posed by the dialogue concept is to build a future on the accomplishments of a dialogue among and cross-fertilization of civilizations. Seen in this perspective, the dialogue among civilizations leaves no room for an evolutionary perspective that separates civilizations in such a way that some are ranked above others and some are set in opposition to others. The term “civilization” can only denote a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon and one that is also interactive since every civilization has been enriched by contact an exchange with other civilizations.

3. The role of intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue

Modern pluralistic societies, if they wish to ensure peace and to preserve the well-being of their citizens, cannot afford to pay the price of cultural monologue or cultural fundamentalism. Today, as the population of many countries has acquired a multi-ethnic character, the development of a democratic society is

impossible without the capacity of each citizen to integrate his or her values and principles with the values of other social-cultural groups.

Certain values and principles are universally shared and cut across all civilizations, establishing a sense of human commonality and community. They propound basic truths and standards of behaviour that constitute the very basis of social cohesions and collective purpose. Any dialogue must therefore focus on the importance of shared values, which give meaning to life and provide form and substance to identities. It must also foster respect for the Other and acknowledge and uphold diversity. In situations of major social and economic transformations, often induced by the consequences of globalization, the constant promotion and renewed awareness of the ethical principles and human rights are of key importance

In the quest for sustainable development, the significance of social-cultural pluralism must be highlighted: how can European values and principles be adapted to the Central Asian context? Can “Western culture” be valued in a different cultural environment? What could be the next stage in the historical development of Eurasia – dialogue or conflict? – An answer to these questions depends on the interpretation of the notions of “culture” and “civilization”. The analysis of the social processes involved - their impact on the interaction of, and compromise between, different civilizations – is essential.

A dialogue among cultures and civilisations knows no limits and boundaries. Intercultural contact and exchange open new opportunities for societies to better understand others - and themselves. The interaction of cultures is therefore an integral feature and precondition of social progress.

Education's central contribution to mutual understanding, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity is undeniable. Thus, educational programmes should not focus on differences, but on the ways in which diversity can enrich lives and on "leaning to live together". This may also include improving dialogue with marginalized groups and promoting tolerance and conflict-resolution programmes in schools, which could be furthered through cooperation with civil society organizations already working on good practices for conflict-resolution. Dialogue nurtured within the minds of human beings through appropriate education can inform and shape overt dialogues among individuals and among groups brought up in different cultural environments leading towards new harmonious existence capable of defining and meeting mutual interests.

The universal - political - commitment to the six goals of Education for All (EFA) adopted in Dakar in April 2000 has created a particularly powerful base for a range of initiatives and approaches, among others to attain universal primary education by 2015 and gender parity in schooling by 2005. At the national level, a systematic incorporation of dialogue approaches necessitates substantial educational reforms. Purposes and goals of national education policies may need to be revised, the precepts of sustainable development promoted, appreciation for and the practice of democratic values, human rights, pluralism and non-violence taught, all complemented and enriched through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Emphasis must be put on curricula, which should promote life skills, human rights, respect for diversity and a culture that helps people learn to live together. Processes include active and learner-centered teaching-learning methods, greater community involvement in more school-based management and the use of appropriate language. The aim is a combination of achievement and attainment in regard to knowledge, attitudes, skills, and the standards and tools needed to assess them. Education for justice, liberty and peace is education of quality.

4. Eurasian and regional aspects of dialogue

In Central Asia, the system of social relations at different levels is far from being perfect and is often of a contradictory character. On the one hand, the efforts of people to meet their growing demands can enhance development; on the other hand, it may reduce the impact of culture and its values on this process. This may create a basis for social conflict. The aspiration to create modern, open societies and a corresponding democratic secular state of the Western type, is viewed by some to bring with it a hidden threat of ethnic and cultural assimilation – reinforced by the dynamics of globalization.

Cultural diversity may be defined as a principle for organizing sustainable cultural plurality, both within and across societies. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) underscores that “...policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life” (Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, Article 2).

Cultural diversity is therefore more than an open-ended menu of differences or variations. It is a mechanism for organizing the most productive dialogue between meaningful pasts and desirable futures. As such it cannot operate strictly within national boundaries and must profit from the dialogue between societies, much as market-based globalization can profit from commerce across national borders. The Declaration aims both to preserve cultural diversity as a living, and thus renewable treasure, that must not be perceived as being unchanging heritage but as a process guaranteeing the survival of humanity; and to prevent segregation and fundamentalism which, in the name of cultural differences, would sanctify those differences and so counter the message of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A revitalized dialogue between culture and development will be necessary to address this challenge. Only in this way can cultural diversity be preserved as an adaptive process and as a capacity for expression, creation and innovation – as well as understanding and reconciliation, where required.

National cultures may be enriched by new possibilities of expression. In that regard, transformations suppose changes of individual and societal norms and

values and a readiness to demonstrate tolerance vis-à-vis other values in addressing social and economic questions.

5. Water and water resources as a factor of national well-being

One of the principal challenges for the Central Asian region and sub-region is to engage in a sustained and effective dialogue to address the range of issues associated with water resources and management.

The crucial role of water and water resources for development, national well-being and often times even security is increasingly being recognized in a region which has the benefit of water sources flowing from the ubiquitous mountains of one country to the many valleys of other neighboring countries – opening up the possibilities for disputes or even conflicts.

Geopolitical changes, population growth, agricultural demands, energy requirements, urbanization, economic growth and industry and globalization all impact on the water situation – and the management of water resources - in complex and highly interdependent ways.

International conflicts over water are predicted to become more frequent as competition for available freshwater resources increases. But as reported by the UN World Water Development Report, the historical record shows that international water disputes do get resolved by treaties between nations with the support of the international community. The Interstate Coordinating Water Commission between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the Indus River Commission between India and Pakistan and the Senegal River in West Africa provide examples of effective trans-boundary water mechanisms.

In this wider context, water as an issue of strategic importance and one of the challenge of the 21st century, has been expressed in global dialogues such as the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 where derived the eight Millennium Development Goals, a widely accepted approach for moving forward on the unfinished development and transition agenda in a way that integrates economics, education, health, gender, environmental and global partnerships issues into a comprehensive development framework and focuses on real monitorable outcomes. Millennium Development Goal number seven, which addresses environmental sustainability, requires Governments to commit to meet the target indicators concerning levels of safe drinking water and sanitation, carbon emissions, forests and protected areas, and improving the situation of slum dwellers - all inter-related.

This was reaffirmed at the World Water fora and further specified by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2002, whereby the number of persons without access to safe water and sanitation should be halved by the year 2015. Meeting the challenge of Water requires substantially increased efforts of global, regional cooperation and dialogues among the countries themselves.

Official data shows that in Europe and Central Asia, 91% of the population have access to improved water supplies, there is a serious issue of water quality, constituting a major health threat. Among the countries, those in Central Asian countries will need to mount the biggest effort in this area. Within Central and Southern Europe, the biggest gaps are in Romania and Albania. Roughly 30% of rural households in the Region do not have access to piped water, much of which is of unhealthy quality. In rural Moldova, 60% of water sampled from water supply systems did not meet water quality standards. Even in Ukraine, 25% of non-piped water is of unacceptable quality with regard to bacteriological and chemical standards. In this context, a specific target relates to environmental stability sustained by improved water management.

There is at present a strong momentum in the international community to recognize the importance of water management in the wider processes of poverty reduction and sustainable development. Dialogue and action to support future reform and concrete programmes through enhanced international cooperation will be key issues in future.

6. The regional context

All these topics are relevant both for the multi-ethnic and multi-faith host country of Kyrgyzstan and for the wider regional setting. The region of Central Asia is historically divided into several parts, depending on the specific focus:

- a) cultural: nomads (Kazakhs, Kirghizes) and urban/settled (Uzbeks, Tadjiks) ;
- b) religious/denominational : Sunni muslims (Kazakhs, Kirghizes, Uzbeks) et Shiite Muslims (Tadjiks) ;
- c) linguistic: Turcophones (Kazakhs et Kirghizes, Uzbeks) et Persanophones (Tadjiks) – with a presence of Russian language in all countries
- d) economic: more prosperous regions (Kazakhs, Uzbeks) and less prosperous regions (Kirghizes, Tadjiks)

All people of Central Asia share a common heritage and influences, which can be briefly summarized as follows:

- a) Islam;
- b) the Silk Road as a commercial and trade route and as a vehicle for disseminating and sharing knowledge and technologies;
- c) the Russian influence;
- d) the Soviet period.

More information on the region can be found at the website

<http://www.eurasianet.org/>.

Given its geographic situation in the heart of Eurasia and its landlocked status, its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-denominational countries and societies, its rich and unique cultures, the Central Asian region is uniquely placed

to help advance the dialogue among cultures and civilizations – and above all a peaceful development.

In early 1990's, the governments of the Central Asian countries made great progress in the sphere of foreign policy. All of them became members of the United Nations and subsequently also members of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Today, the Central Asian countries also play an active role in international religious organizations, the most influential of which are the Islamic Conference and the World Islamic Congress, which enjoys the status of non-governmental consultancy organization under the UN.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all Central Asian states have aspired to create modern, secular, open democratic societies. The main features of political development consist of living through a new stage of synthesis of foreign, and local socio-political systems and relations, the latter being characterized by the intertwined processes of “modernization” and “re-traditionalization”.

The international conference “EurAsia in the 21st century – Dialogue of Cultures or Conflict of Civilizations”, taking its point of departure in the recent resolution (resolution 47) of UNESCO's General Conference, will focus on the socio-political, cultural and religious context of the region. To that end, a number of questions will need to be addressed, such as:

- How can a dialogue among cultures and civilizations provide a new, inclusive model of human relationships for sustainable development in the region?
- Can the dialogue become a guide in the political, economic and cultural transition that the region must live through in the age of globalisation?
- Can the region find a place in the global context through the application of a paradigm of dialogue among cultures and civilizations, by agreeing on the relevance of and promoting universally shared values, by integrating the concept of cultural diversity and by applying the precepts of dialogue to the critically important area of water management?

7. The geo-political, economic and cultural situation of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is an ancient country at the crossroads of cultures and civilizations, situated in the heart of Eurasia, through which passed the Great Silk Road linking East and West. The Kyrgyz land witnessed many historical events – migration of peoples, changes of religious and traditional orientations, social cataclysms and revolutions. The Kyrgyz nomadic culture is characterized by syncreticism and recognized for its tolerance. At the crossroads of major processes of historical development, Kyrgyzstan underwent the influence of various cultures and civilizations: Tengrianism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. All these major socio-cultural phenomena had their impact to social memory and philosophy of the people.

Kyrgyzstan as a newly independent country is in search of qualitatively new parameters of its socio-economic and political evolution and efficient interaction with the world community. Kyrgyzstan takes an active part in the processes ensuring regional security, civil peace and harmony. Taking into account the complex socio-political circumstances in Central Asia – growth of nationalist forces, separatism, religious fundamentalism, the threat of armed conflict – the first Democratic Congress of the Central Asian Countries took place on 30 -31 May 1992 in Kyrgyzstan, the participants of which decided to found a Coordinated Congress Center in Bishkek.

As one of the measures ensuring regional security is the proposal of Kyrgyzstan to create on its territory an open zone for intercultural and intra-civilizational dialogue in the Eurasian geopolitical space.

8. Intercultural, interethnic and inter-faith interaction as the development resource of the Kyrgyzstan

The idea of dialogue among civilizations may seem to be a dream, influenced by the fear of other cultures and by prejudices, misunderstandings and failures. In that context it can be adduced that Kyrgyzstan presents an example of unique mixture of Asian and European cultural environment. From ancient times till today its syncretic nature determines the economic and cultural development of the country. Kyrgyzstan is a Eurasian country. The Eurasian cultural space had a great influence on the way of development chosen by the Kyrgyz people in the building of its civil society. This choice was preconditioned by the specificities of the country, the historically traditional way of life, and its rich ancient culture.

The realization of the tasks at hand implies radical reforms in all spheres of social life – democratization of the state power, liberalization of the economy, poverty alleviation, preservation and enrichment of traditional cultural values, drawing on accomplishments of science and technology. Such transformations in multi-ethnic Kyrgyzstan are impossible without intercultural interaction. Hence, the presence of various ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan enriches the spiritual and economic potential of the country.

In Kyrgyzstan, the development of democratic reforms has enabled the provision of many basic human rights, including the right to religious freedom. The Kyrgyz authorities view religion and its cultural and educational role in constructive terms and there is a revival of interest in the traditions and values of Islam, including moral values. The challenge of fostering good relations between nationalities and confessions, and promoting peace and harmony, are among the preoccupations of the Kyrgyz authorities at present.

The increased tolerance vis-à-vis other ethnicities and religions, and the aspiration towards interfaith harmony, as well as the strengthening of civic peace and harmony within society would seem to be in accordance with the slogan 'Kyrgystan – our common home' (Kyrgyzstan – nash obshchi dom').

The spiritual life of the new Eurasian states today is free and multicultural. However, new social values have not yet been shaped in the minds of people

liberated from the previous ideological monopoly. Principles of civil society in statehood formation have not acquired yet the irreversible character either. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a qualitatively new level, namely the concept of a modern democratic society based on socio-cultural pluralism. In this context, the Forum may draw up a “catalogue” of relevant new systems and modalities, such as consolidation, conventionality, communicativeness, “co-existence” of differences in a trans-boundary, confederative and spatial vision.

9. Select issues for consideration by the Forum

- East and West as socio-cultural formations need to develop dialogue as equal partners, based on the precepts of tolerance and mutual understanding.
- Cultural values shall not be divided and opposed merely because they emanate from different civilizations.
- The complex problems of security, international terrorism and globalization of violence can only be solved through dialogue, mutual understanding, respect and partnership.
- The economic basis of a dialogue among civilizations lies in international trade, investment and innovative cooperation, the revival and creation of new international transportation corridors and the development of tourism.
- The benefits of globalization shall accrue to all peoples and shall help to tackle poverty alleviation and to resolve water and environment problems.
- The paradigms of the culture of peace and the dialogue among civilisations shall permeate the education of young generations and their value orientation.
- The integration of ecological problems with economic and social problems will be a precondition for a successful development and management of acute issues.

The need for a dialogue among civilizations is as old as civilizations themselves. The phenomena of globalization and the emergence of new challenges and threats to humankind make this need more topical than ever. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the population of Eurasia understand the vital necessity of dialogue among civilizations and the mutual enrichment of cultures, provides a basis for optimism indeed.