



**CONFERENCE ON FOSTERING DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS THROUGH CONCRETE AND SUSTAINED INITIATIVES
(Rabat, Morocco, 14-16 June 2005)**

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

A joint initiative of the:

- I. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- II. Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)
- III. Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO)
- IV. Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)
- V. Danish Center for Culture and Development (DCCO, Copenhagen)
- VI. Anna Lindh Euro Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (Alexandria, Egypt)

I. INTRODUCTION

For several years, and especially since the United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations, 2001, the issues raised by the dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples have been addressed in many conferences and meetings organized by the United Nations, the partners associated in the present joint initiative and numerous stakeholders in a wide range of countries and regions. They have given rise to resolutions, declarations, programmes and publications and it is clear that an important advocacy role has been fulfilled by these activities, in particular with regard to highlighting that the dialogue should serve several purposes:

- enhancing similarities and common values, while cherishing differences;
- working to adopt and promote a mindset which views the eradication of poverty, racism and xenophobia, terror, extremism, hatred and intolerance as an inescapable moral imperative for each human being;
- moving beyond mere conversation, altruism and participation to concrete problem-solving activities, encompassing education and training, scientific communication and cultural cooperation;
- fostering pluralism, pluralistic approaches and freedom of expression, not only between cultures and traditions, but also within them.

It has been unanimously agreed that dialogue must be based on the following principles, values and attitudes:

- the equal dignity of cultures and their capacity to cross-fertilize, inspire and enrich each other;
- the need to uphold and enhance cultural diversity;
- mutual respect, with the ultimate goal of learning to live together;
- openness and self-critical attitudes – as each culture or civilization can be critical towards others; but should also be critical towards itself, including a critical examination of historical memory;
- self-respect and awareness of one's own values and ideals as a basis to lay the foundations of a non-arrogant and fruitful dialogue leading to mutual enrichment.

In a world characterized by a great diversity of cultures – as recognized and appreciated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and also the Islamic Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2004), by globalization of changes affecting all areas of human activity, and by a recognition of the role of religion in societies, it is necessary to reconcile the values of the individual, the community or national identities with universally shared values. Globalization should not prevent local cultures from thriving and developing, while emphasis on local dimensions should not run counter to regional and universal orientations and approaches.

Worldwide, religions have played and are still playing an important role in shaping the cultural identity of individuals, communities and peoples, and they are a key component of the building of civilizations and cultures. Religions can and should have a role in the promotion and support of a positive intercultural dialogue and building on contributions emanating from inter-religious and interfaith dialogue.

Universally shared values are those which link citizens to their community and at the same time commit them to share a vision for their future, based on tolerance, justice, solidarity, trust and mutual respect and understanding, moral behaviour, awareness of the need for democratic governance and sustainable development, the responsible exercise of authority, and the recognition and treatment of others as equals. Above all, there is a need to strive for a better reciprocal knowledge of cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic dimensions of other peoples, nations and communities.

II. THE ROAD AHEAD: DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A JOINT INITIATIVE

The advocacy for a constructive dialogue among cultures and civilizations is a task that must be anchored in, and nurtured by, the nations and peoples, as well as by the international, regional governmental and non-governmental organizations. It is part of a much needed pedagogy, particularly through the current difficult times when a mistaken notion of “clash of civilizations” is invoked by some quarters.

There is an overwhelming conviction worldwide, if not a sense of urgency, that concrete and sustained activities should be designed and implemented in all regions and by the widest range of partners and stakeholders, so as to make the dialogue a reality of our daily life and to buttress peace within and among the nations through a series of concrete, results-oriented actions.

This need has been strongly emphasized by the governing bodies of the organizations involved in the present joint initiative. However, this does not mean to start from scratch. Rather, the challenge is to build on the already numerous declarations, reports and initiatives containing a rich font of activities, actions and ideas building on and fostering dialogue; they need to be strengthened, made sustainable and translated into concrete and specific measures that can realistically be implemented within a given time-line. They also need to be extended to, and diversified in, the areas of education, the sciences, culture and communication.

This is why the partners who have launched this joint initiative considered it an important, if not indispensable step to call an international conference, to be attended mostly by experts and practitioners with demonstrated experience and knowledge in the various areas which can benefit from intercultural dialogue at national, regional or international levels. The conference will also bring together specific members of the secretariats of the organizing, supporting and cooperation institutions. Indeed, their presence, involvement and commitments are particularly crucial for the desired and necessary follow-up to the Conference through the workplans of the organizations.

The Conference should thus be seen as a launch pad for the development and adoption of a series of concrete measures and activities exploring how specific objectives can be achieved through various dialogue modalities, strengthened and encouraged at national, regional and international levels, identifying good practices from the regions represented.

III. AREAS OF FOCUS: INDICATE ELEMENTS FOR A PROGRAMME OF CONCRETE ACTION

1. Education

Quality education is a prerequisite for dialogue among cultures, civilizations and peoples because it encompasses not only quantifiable measures of educational attainment, but also the qualitative aspects of curricula and their contents including shared values, human rights, tolerance and mutual understanding. Educational institutions and learning materials can uniquely serve as a vehicle for dialogue and intercultural understanding. This also involves working with obstacles for educational planners at central and regional levels. In fact, there has been and there is a repeated appeal from governments, politicians, parliamentarians, educators, decision-makers and civic society representatives to use education as a privileged tool for fostering the dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

a. Citizenship education to teach adolescents and young people their legal rights and obligations, law, commitment to shared values, equity and justice, tolerance and respect for the Other. This should focus on developing the capacity to live together in a democratic environment, while respecting the persons, but not their opinions when/if these are inherently intolerable and opposed to human rights and basic freedoms.

b. Multicultural education aimed at enhancing and improving knowledge of culture, civilizations, religions and traditions, in particular through the teaching of foreign languages, the popularisation of works in the social and human sciences, literature and arts, and the creation of university chairs on subjects relating to dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Both civic and multicultural education can be achieved through the design and broad dissemination of teacher's guides and curriculum models, through the revision of national textbooks and school handbooks as well as of university curricula, particularly in key disciplines such as history, geography, philosophy, social and human sciences. This is a long-term task, but an imperative one, which could be carried out at sub-regional and national levels by teams of teachers and university specialists with the assistance of international and regional organizations (e.g. UNESCO, ISESCO, ALECSO, specialized foundations and NGOs).

c. Textbook revision & exchange programmes

Textbooks appropriate for the 21st century indeed need to reflect more inclusive pedagogies and diversified content, it not only impact academic knowledge, but also engage learners in interactions leading to the acquisition of life skills and universally-shared values within a human rights perspective. Textbooks present an opportunity for engaged dialogue between students, between teachers, and by extension between students and their families, and ultimately between cultures. It is therefore relevant that this proposed part of the future plan of action be thoroughly discussed at the Conference.

Discussions are proposed to focus on the:

- methodologies for examining textbooks from a gender and a human rights perspective, so as to eliminate stereotypes and develop a positive approach to gender issues and to respect of human rights and basic freedoms;
- ways and means of integrating balanced and accurate views of other cultures and civilizations, e.g. in the teaching of history and sociology of religions and civilizations at secondary school level;
- the role of the teacher in interpreting and developing textbook materials that are unbiased and free from stereotypes.
- expected results from modernisation of textbooks include the acquisition of competences and skills necessary for dialogue between cultures such as critical thinking and the ability to observe from more than one perspective ("multi-perspectivity")

School links and exchanges have also a deep impact on intercultural learning in schools if intercultural exchanges are integrated as a strategy for curriculum development and reform. The Conference would be invited to discuss ways and means to foster interregional and sub-regional level school exchanges and links.

2. Science

The key modalities of dialogue-related action concern the establishment of regional cooperation mechanisms in the Scientific Fields with a view to increasing and systematizing knowledge of diverse cultures. Efforts should also include the promotion of scientific collaboration, networking and interaction, for example through the creation and strengthening of scientific networks and twinning arrangements among universities. With increasing globalization and changing patterns of work organization, international dialogue is also particularly important in the engineering sciences in the context of professional practice in such areas as standards, quality assurance, accreditation and mobility.

Discussions could focus on:

- the study and documentation of ethical principles and practices in the main scientific issues, such as genetic research, fresh water, etc, and the promotion of a common stand on these issues, in respect of the Cultural and religious considerations.
- the promotion of scientific and technological exchange and the quest for sustainable development, in particular through sharing and networking among knowledge holders from all knowledge systems;
- interdisciplinary global networks of specialists and partner institutions, including public and private sector partnerships.

3. Social and Human Sciences

A priority should be given for the continuation of dialogue between philosophers of the Arab world and those from other regions in order to promote mutual understanding between philosophical traditions and especially the establishment of intellectual partnerships in order to better understand major problems confronting the various cultures concerned and their consequences for social stability and prevention of conflicts. Within this framework, in November 2004 UNESCO ready launched a philosophical dialogue between the Arab world and Asia which will continue in 2005 in Seoul (South Korea) on the topic of democracy and social justice.

Emphasis should be placed on the promotion of philosophy in order to widen and enrich the debates in progress on the problems faced by the contemporary world open to civil society; for this purpose, the implementation of the three pillars of UNESCO's intersectoral strategy for philosophy, together with the celebration of World Philosophy Day could constitute major assets.

Analysis of new forms of violence, the promotion of democracy, human rights, human security and knowledge societies strong domains to reinforce a dialogue among cultures and civilizations, and this, at a time when the debate on the long-term nature and effects of the processes of globalization is at a turning point in various parts of the world.

The contribution of historians to the dialogue among civilizations must be reinforced through interregional partnerships aiming at offering a tribune for the different perceptions of historical processes, in particular, those that touch contemporary history, following the example of the conferences organized by UNESCO on "Civilizations in the Eye of the Other" parts I and II.

4. Culture

A particular challenge lies in demonstrating that cultural heritage and identity can become a powerful symbol for fostering national and regional understanding, reciprocal knowledge and indeed reconciliation, where appropriate. Once respect for cultural heritage allows people to understand themselves, it will also be a key to understanding others. Attention should also be paid to the re-creation of stereotypes, prejudices and xenophobia in contemporary culture (specific cultural forms and expressions). Concrete cooperation can contribute to intercultural dialogue e.g.:

- a. Cultural festivals and events
There is considerable scope to set a more effective agenda of dialogue in most cultural festivals and events, such as global sport events, cultural fora and capitals, art and book fairs, youth festivals and encounters. For instance, the IMAGES festival has been held in Denmark since 1991 to foster dialogue and cultural understanding among the public in this country; the event is based on extensive networking, cooperation between civic society, co-funding and partnership.
- b. Cultural and musical creation and interaction
Possibilities shall be explored to promote dialogue involving diverse aspects of cultural creations from different cultures.
Such interaction of cultures may include musical interaction involving songs and original instruments from various cultures as well as exchange and partnership between writers, painters, musicians or producers, with a focus on translation and joint productions, in order to consolidate and foster the human dimensions of dialogue.
- c. Arts, arts management and creative industries
Artists and producers of cultural goods can foster genuine intercultural dialogue and understanding. An enabling environment should be created in this regard. This can be done through a variety of initiatives, which include exchange of best practices, training, education, and networking. For instance, in cooperation with the Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity and the International Network for Cultural Diversity, partnership programmes can be established between regions to strengthen viable cultural industries and foster arts management and exchanges.
- d. National museums
Although national museums focus on the various facets of national culture, sections or departments devoted to multicultural aspects and issues can be very useful to inform the public at large about the contents and purpose of intercultural dialogue. Temporary and itinerary exhibitions can fulfil a similar role. The topics to be selected could be: history and sociology; history of science and contribution of different civilizations to science advancement; history of arts, etc.

- e. Training and retraining of staff in charge of cultural development
It is advisable and even necessary to introduce cultural elements and information about shared values into the training and retraining programmes of staff in charge of cultural development, so as to enable them to tackle intercultural issues. This kind of action would also apply to the training of religious leaders and mediators.

5. Information and Communication

Since the mass media play a key role in shaping public opinion, they have great potential to facilitate the dialogue among cultures and civilizations by expanding the public's knowledge about cultural, ethnic, social and religious communities. This can be done at all levels and in all media, from news over feature stories to fiction and cartoons. All levels mean that international, regional, national and local media can play an active role in the dialogue context.

In developing countries, radio is still the most efficient media to help initiate and develop dialogue, such as through the use of live round-table or panel discussions with open lines for callers. Radio can reach the isolated, and often excluded, through community radio stations.

The internet offers individuals the opportunity to easily communicate with members of other cultural and social groups irrespective of national or other borders. These new forms of media contribute greatly to increased, diversified and decentralized information flows. Linguistic variety in terms of internet content, better, cheaper and possibly automated translation services, along with a greater emphasis on foreign language education, will help the language barrier to a successful dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

- a. Addressing ignorances, stereotypes and prejudices in the media (text and images)
This should be an objective of training and retraining of journalists, as well as an obligation in performing their daily work. In addition to short- and medium-term measures, long-term planning can deal with twinning of journalists, editors and media institutions from different cultural regions.
- b. Using images in the public space to struggle against stereotypes
- c. Intercultural competencies in the training of journalists and media professionals
A set of intercultural competencies, to be specified at the conference, could be instilled in new generations of journalists. This is a long-term action that could be illustrated through specific projects in selected schools of journalism, belonging to different cultural regions and working in partnership.

In view of the range and outreach of satellite broadcasting, dialogue among cultures and peoples can also be promoted through dedicated TV programmes and live meetings between children, youth and members of civil society associations worldwide with the aim of exchanging viewpoints on issues related to their daily preoccupations.

In line with the Declaration of Principles and Action Plan issued by the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva 2003, practical measures should be developed to help overcome the digital divide through digital solidarity, promoting cultural diversity and cooperation in this field.

The setting up, at the regional and international levels, of networks between media and communication personalities aimed at developing mutual understanding and respect.