



**INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON
DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS**

**Sana'a – Republic of Yemen
10 and 11 February 2004**

**STRENGTHENING THE DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS AND
CULTURES IN THE ARAB REGION**

BACKGROUND PAPER

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1. Background and setting

The International Symposium on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations to be held in Sana'a, Yemen, 10 -11 February 2004, as a joint effort between the Government of Yemen and UNESCO, and support from Japanese Funds-in-Trust, reflects a commitment to the important role a dialogue among civilisations can and must play in our contemporary world, notwithstanding difficulties, complexities and ignorances. The Symposium is set in the larger, global framework of the UN Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace¹, the United Nations Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations², UNESCO's "New Delhi Declaration"³ as well as UNESCO's "Message from Ohrid"⁴ – all of which set out new approaches, concepts and perspectives for future activities of UNESCO in the area of the dialogue among civilizations at the global and regional levels. Capping this array of international efforts is the landmark resolution adopted by the UNESCO's General Conference at its 32nd session in October 2003, by which it welcomed "the lead role UNESCO has taken at all levels in promoting a dialogue among civilisations and cultures" and highlighted "its unique role in building new bridges between civilisations and cultures."⁵

Dialogue among civilisations and cultures has the capacity to strengthen human rights, democracy and tolerance, and to foster peace and peaceful practises and discourse, in general. Dialogue is critical to convey and purvey a realistic picture of the diversity and riches of inter-civilisational relations. Likewise, dialogue and exchanges also have an inherent potential as a moderating force and they can play a significant role in countering terrorism or terrorist inclinations. In that context, it is crucial to reconcile the promotion of common universal values with cultural diversity, and to highlight the importance of education both as a basis of a culture of peace and tolerance, and as a crucible of development and poverty alleviation. Similarly, the contribution of the Arab-Muslim cultures to other civilizations of the world deserves genuine, scientific scrutiny and other appropriate attention.

The Sana'a event is then the first regional event after the UNESCO General Conference has debated this issue (in plenary), operating within the newly validated framework. The Symposium seeks to elicit and yield more than general statements and agreements about the positive effects of dialogue, aiming at the identification of practical measures and the stimulation of concrete action, which may be a building bloc in the construction of an

¹ UN Resolution "Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace" - A/RES/53/243; UN Resolution: Culture of Peace A/RES/52/13

² United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/6 of 21 November 2001: Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations.

³ adopted by the "International Ministerial Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations: Quest for New Perspectives" in New Delhi, India, 9 and 10 July 2003 – for full text see <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue2001/delhi/index.html>

⁴ adopted by the Regional Forum on the Dialogue among Civilisations in Ohrid, 29 and 30 August 2003 – for full text see <http://www.unesco.org/dialogue2001/ohrid/message.htm>

⁵ "New Perspectives in UNESCO's Activities pertaining to the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures, including in particular follow-up to the New Delhi Ministerial Conference" – General Conference resolution 32 C/47 of October 2003

effective and sustainable dialogue in the 21st century – indeed, the grand ambition could be described as nurturing and forging a culture of dialogue.

The Arab region straddles two continents. It is not only the cradle of Islamic civilization, but it gave also birth to two other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Judaism. Yemen, situated in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, lies at a crossroad of these and other different civilisations. The country has a very rich cultural heritage - three of its cities, the old walled city of Shibam, the historic town of Zabid and the capital, Sana'a, are inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Sana'a has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years, becoming a major centre for the propagation of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. This religious and political heritage is still very present in the 103 mosques, 14 *hammams* and over 6,000 houses, all built before the 11th century – which form a vivid and most impressive background for a Symposium focusing on the dialogue among civilisations and cultures.⁶

Yemen's evolution from a divided country, the sufferings of a civil war in 1994 into a unified state stands as a perfect example of the region's transformation. The development of concrete activities and approaches within the field of dialogue among cultures and civilizations is an essential element in order to meet the challenges of globalisation and modernisation, while preserving distinct cultural identities within an international community seeking to build consensus on and around universally shared values.

2. Building an international framework to promote a dialogue between cultures and civilisations

The UN General Assembly proclaimed the year 2001 the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, highlighting new dimensions of the dialogue against the growing interdependence of communities, nations, cultures and civilizations, and setting the stage for a broader international debate - and a renewed commitment to dialogue at all levels. UNESCO was, among others, invited "to plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programmes to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations, including through organizing conferences and seminars and disseminating information and scholarly material on the subject".⁷

UNESCO's Action Plan for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilisations (2001) emphasized the necessity of defining "civilisation" as a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon, for the simple – yet often neglected – reason that civilisations have always been enriched by contact and exchange with other civilisations, hence always involved in a dynamic process of change and redefinition of "self". Civilisations are inherently "inter-cultural". Cultural monologues or cultural fundamentalism, which freeze "the Other" as an alien, and as such a potential enemy, run counter to this constitutive feature of human civilisation and social organisation.

⁶ see <http://whc.unesco.org/nwhc/pages/sites/main.htm>

⁷ General Assembly resolution 53/22 of 4 November 1998

Meeting the practical challenge, UNESCO initiated, organised and sponsored numerous events, conferences and colloquia on the dialogue among civilisations – at national, regional and international levels. The terrorist acts of 11 September 2001 instilled a new momentum and a sense of urgency. Under the impact of these events, UNESCO's 31st General Conference adopted unanimously a resolution⁸, in which it considered that “all acts of terrorism are a denial of the principles and values of the United Nations Charter, the UNESCO Constitution and the UNESCO Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance (1995) and represent an attack against humanity as a whole”. The resolution affirmed, among others, that the dialogue among civilisations “constitutes a fundamental challenge based on the unity of mankind and commonly shared values, the recognition of its cultural diversity and the equal dignity of each civilization and each culture”.

Two years later, the 2003 New Delhi International Ministerial Conference on “The Dialogue among Civilisations - Quest for New Perspectives” identified new avenues for UNESCO's future activities and orientations, especially within the domains of education and science and technology and within the realm of common values.

Against this background, UNESCO's General Conference in October 2003 not only endorsed the New Delhi Declaration, but requested that the Organisation should move beyond the stage of general agreement and statements of intent, to seek new responses using the vectors of education, science and technology, cultural diversity and the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) with a view to constructing a framework for dialogue particularly at the regional and sub-regional level.⁹

4. The role of dialogue in the Arab region

- **The quest for common values**

The Arab world is characterised by its diversity. Various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups inhabit the 21 countries while traditions rooted in Islam and in the Arabic language form a strong focal and rallying point for Arab societies. Throughout the Islamic expansion, Muslims have lived together with Christians and Jews, later with Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Hindus. Values such as peace and tolerance, equality of men and women, and freedom of religion are also observed and applied in the region.

Arab cultures have also always exhibited openness and growth and favored interaction and interchange. In the region, other civilisations have not only been accepted, but their customs and cultural practices were often also embraced and integrated. The exchange with the Greek civilisation, from the 9th to 10th century AD and the opening of the Arab world to Western sciences,

⁸ “Call for international cooperation to prevent and eradicate acts of terrorism” – UNESCO General Conference resolution 31 C/39

⁹ “New Perspectives in UNESCO's Activities pertaining to the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures, including in particular follow-up to the New Delhi Ministerial Conference” – UNESCO General Conference resolution and background document 32 C/INF.15

arts, knowledge and technology in the 19th century are two well-known examples of mutual inspiration and exchanges.

The current trend of focussing on antagonistic relationships between cultures and civilizations neglects the historic fact that exchanges between civilisations have been a major force of development. In the past, the then lesser developed European civilisation profited significantly from a peaceful exchange of goods and ideas with Arab cultures and Islamic empires. These relations took the form of trade, religious conversion and academic, societal and technological interactions. They have now reached a new dimension with modern information and communication as well transportation technologies.

As is the case with other regions and cultures, Arab culture today is challenged by globalisation and its consequences in terms of economic, social, geopolitical and global transformations as well as regional and societal cleavages and disparities. The transformations encompass moves towards more democracy and democratic practises, observance of fundamental freedoms and human rights, including women's rights, as well as the respect for common universal values. They also are addressing mindsets, stereotypes, new ignorances and fundamentalist tendencies. The region is equally challenged by the power of instantaneous mass communication, and by the power of global financial networks. This gives rise to concerns about the preservation of language and identity. Clearly, the search for an authentic and shared global community must make use of the modality of dialogue between different faiths, cultures and civilisations.

Certain values and principles are universally shared and cut across all civilizations, establishing a sense of community among them. Dialogue nurtures a common base for human existence rooted in history, heritage and tradition. Any dialogue must focus on the importance of shared values, which give meaning to life and provide form and substance to identities. Tolerance is such a core principle that transcends civilisational differences. Dialogue must foster tolerance and respect for the other and acknowledge and uphold diversity. Above all, values are essential for preserving a peaceful and just society.

In future, it will be important to promote a constantly renewed awareness of these universal values, ethical principles and attitudes that lie at the very heart of a true dialogue. Respect for human rights, inclusiveness, and the search for unity in diversity need to be constantly reaffirmed and reasserted in the light of major social and economic transformations, such as those induced by globalisation.

- **Education – an indispensable element for sustained dialogue**

Education is a unique instrumentality and process to help forge unity in the midst of differences and to ensure sustained and continuous dialogue between cultures and civilisations. Indeed, education at all levels – through formal, non-formal and informal approaches – has an inherent ability to release the potential of dialogue, provided it is accessible to all.

The Arab world is a region in transition, developing and modernising itself while being dedicated to preserving its traditions and values. Its young population is in need of educational institutions and educational materials that are able to serve as a vehicle for peace, dialogue and intercultural understanding. Otherwise, the risk exists that youth can be instrumentalized and used as vehicles for spreading misunderstanding, intolerance, and hate.

But the quest for education alone is not enough. The ambition must be to introduce and be guided by “quality education” to develop an understanding of universally shared values and to encourage the development of key competencies for peace and the prevention and resolution of conflict and which can serve as a conveyor to knowledge in general and knowledge about other cultures, civilizations, religions and traditions in particular. The need to bring about quality education, in the context of the Education for All (EFA) movement, will be paramount for the Arab region.

The universal – political – commitment to the six goals of EFA adopted in Dakar in April 2000 has created a particularly powerful base for a range of initiatives and approaches, among others to attain gender parity in schooling by 2005, which has been enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by all Heads of Government at the United Nations Millennium Summit. The quest for gender parity will however not only be essential for the attainment of the MDGs, but equally for the social and economic dynamic development of all societies in the region.

National EFA plans in the Arab region have started to raise awareness among parents in collaboration with civil society, the media and government bodies of the social, economic and developmental cost of neglecting the education of girls. The establishment of sound indicators to monitor and evaluate the situation is another important strategy towards EFA and thus a valuable impact on the promotion of peace, dialogue and understanding.

A systematic incorporation of dialogue into curricula necessitates substantial educational reforms. Purposes and goals of national education policies may need to be revised, curricula, textbooks, school and teaching learning materials reviewed and 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). Strategies to educate new generations of teachers and a reorientation and education of serving teachers must complement this agenda. The inevitably long-term processes of human rights education and conflict resolution point to the necessity to extend these actions to lifelong education, which encourages learning beyond formal education, in informal and non-formal settings.

- **Cultural diversity and cultural heritage – the route to identity and reconciliation**

Today, Arab countries are encouraged to rediscover their common heritage and their shared values – beyond the diversity of languages, cultures and religions. The creation of a common cultural space, based on the full participation by civil society, would facilitate such an endeavour. This new space will need to be built around the precepts of dialogue and universal values.

Cultural heritage in the Arab world is anchored in rich and complex civilizations, such as ancient Egypt, Sumer, Assyria, Babylonia and Phoenicia. Yet, Islam and the Arabic languages constitute the two predominant features of a common heritage of the region, which comprises language, literature, religion, culture, science, art and traditions. The region's heritage is an important and often overlooked dimension of the notion of modernity for Arab culture and civilisation. The region attests that cultural diversity does act as a catalyst for dialogue and offers a source of richness for all civilisations and cultures. It is undeniable that a dialogue among civilisations is inseparably linked with cultural diversity, as defined in the Universal UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the 31st session of UNESCO's General Conference on 2 November 2001.

Preserving and using the Arab world's rich cultural heritage as a source for the creation of a modern identity supposes the abandonment of intercultural antagonisms and the rise of a common culture based on the acceptance of diversity. The ability to manage cultural pluralism determines the maturing of society and allows the latter to evolve to a situation where rational choices can be exercised in building a democratic society capable of integrating differences. In this sense, cultural pluralism is an opportunity for the future and a motor for the present. It is this potential, which makes it a constructive force.

Like in other regions, cultural heritage can also serve as a vector for reconciliation. In building on knowledge about history, cultural accomplishments and cultural exchanges, a foundation is laid that can provide, if properly utilised, an enhancement of mutual understanding, respect and pride, and a locus of convergence of different experiences.

- **Dialogue and terrorism**

Terrorism and the notion of a clash of civilizations have had a strong resonance in the Arab region and among its inhabitants. The "fertile ground" and "mindsets", adduced by Samuel Huntington, which are seen to allow for terrorism must be placed in the context of the effects of globalisation and an emerging sense of relative deprivation and isolation. Education is one, if not a key long-term means to address roots and problems of terrorism. A holistic rights- and values-based approach is necessary to buttress human security through the application of the rule of law and the pursuit of social justice and democratic practises.

Quality education is not only relevant within the broader, above-mentioned field of education; it is also a key element in any dissuasion strategy against terrorism. The notion of quality education in this context not merely encompasses aspects of educational attainment, but especially the aspects of curricula and their content focusing on peace, shared values, human rights, democracy, tolerance and mutual understanding. High levels of educational attainment alone do not prevent a person from committing violent and unlawful acts. UNESCO has therefore deliberately placed programmes related to education for peace and human rights within the area of quality of education, emphasizing the importance of addressing these issues within a long-term overall strategy.

In this context, mass media and ICTs can serve as effective learning vehicles and tools of engagement. The growing influence of the mass media on the perceptions of increasing numbers of individuals, especially among the growing – and often unemployed – young generation in the region, and the concomitant importance of free and independent media in that regard must be increasingly recognised and supported. The primordial challenge will be to induce and channel the contribution of the media and other forms of ICTs towards a message of peace, tolerance and dialogue as well as gender equality rather than to the propagation of messages of intolerance, hate, ignorance and false idols.

Beyond, the fight against terrorism can also be aided by a free and broad access to knowledge and information. Linked with efforts to secure pluralism and cultural diversity, this combination will not only be critical in the fight against poverty and for human development, but equally for the fight against terrorism. For it is in promoting economic and social welfare and creating strong democratic societies that terrorism is most effectively defeated.

5. Conclusion

Dialogue among cultures and civilisations challenges old and new forms of ignorance and prejudice. It promotes mutual understanding and exchange, tolerance and peace. If the objective is to instill a culture of peace in the region, then the principal focus must be on a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations.

Dialogue among civilisations and cultures is needed in order to challenge and proof invalid Samuel Huntington's thesis that the call for tolerance, equality and justice will inevitably clash with Arab religious and social traditions.

Dialogue among cultures and civilisations bridges the development of a country's citizens and underpins their political, economic, social and cultural integration in the global community of nations.

The concept of human development places people at the centre of all development efforts by focusing on an enlargement of people's choices. Our host country, Yemen, as many other countries in the Arab world, faces today the task of enabling its population to make essential choices: to lead a long and healthy life; to acquire knowledge and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living; to live in political, economic and social freedom; to enjoy guaranteed human rights and self-respect as well as opportunities for being creative and productive. This has been highlighted through the last two Arab Human Development Reports, produced by UNDP in 2002 and 2003 and represents a formidable agenda for political action and change. Particular mention should be made in that context of the Reports' message that women in the region suffer – more than in other regions - from inequality of opportunity, evident in employment status, wages and gender-based occupational segregation.

Ultimately, a dialogue among civilisations is not only a process between, but also within civilizations. The Sana'a Symposium bringing together decision-makers and leaders, intellectuals, scholars, researchers and actors of civil society from the Arab world and from other cultural areas, complemented by experts from the United Nations family, will be a unique occasion to uncover and examine assumptions, to shed light on the meaning of shared values and to integrate multiple perspectives through dialogue. The ultimate reward of such an exercise will be to let peoples and countries from many different cultures and backgrounds come together – and not apart.