“Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning”

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Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to share views on how to make lifelong learning a keystone of educational policy, and more broadly of social and economic policy. In today’s globalized, knowledge-driven world, this is the only way forward.

A premium is placed on education, what must follow is political commitment and resources to enable individuals to access relevant, quality learning opportunities in different ways, at different stages of their life.

Education’s relevance and importance
UNESCO places top priority on education as a human right and as a development imperative. These two dimensions are significant: education has intrinsic value but carries lasting personal, social, economic, political and cultural benefits. These benefits have tangible and intangible dimensions. Levels of education have an impact on economic growth, on productivity and on poverty reduction. They are associated with better health, lower child and maternal mortality, lower fertility rates and better prevention against HIV/AIDS. It is more important than ever to reiterate the fundamental contribution of education to national and international development, to democracy and political participation, and to environmental sustainability. Education is also about empowerment and transformation, about values and awareness of oneself, others and the world. The capacity to make informed choices, to generate broad public debate around issues affecting our society, calls for an educated population. This is why education must find its place at the centre of the political agenda. Making education a priority today means improving the prospects of employment, decent livelihoods and a more sustainable future tomorrow.

Global landscape: globalization and inequalities
All this was true before the financial crisis, and it is even more true in the present situation. Our societies today are characterized by interdependence and increasing integration driven by technology. They are also characterized by growing inequalities. An OECD report published last week finds that income gaps have widened over the past two decades in three-fourths of OECD countries. In today’s changing world economy, this means ever more people at risk of being left behind. The report finds that the largest part of the increase in inequality comes from changes in labour markets. Low-skilled workers are having ever-greater problems in finding jobs. The report states that better education is a powerful way to achieve growth which benefits all and that education policies should aim to equip people with the skills they need in today’s labour market.

The forthcoming Education for All Global Monitoring Report, to be released next month, will also highlight the fact that inequalities in educational opportunities are a major brake to achieving Education for All. Removing these barriers will require political leadership and strategies that tackle the underlying causes of disadvantage and ensure that that the benefits of education are shared by the poor, disadvantaged groups and regions that are being left behind.

Today’s financial crisis starkly brings out the need for more sustainable foundations and for more social justice. Gathered in New York over the weekend, the heads of UN agencies, the World Bank and the IMF jointly stated that “the crisis we are seeing today will impact all
countries developed and developing but its most serious repercussions will be felt most by those who are least responsible – the poor in developing countries.” Cutting education spending in this environment is to affect the future of a generation. It is very important that education services be continued in these difficult situations, especially for the most poor and disadvantaged.

Educational marginalization is not compatible with democratic participation, economic growth, or the achievement of any of the development objectives to which over 180 countries committed themselves in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals are about less poverty, better lives, better health, better nutrition and sounder environmental practices. They are about reducing vulnerability and marginalization and assuring that all individuals acquire confidence, skills and knowledge to contribute to their societies. None of these goals can be achieved without investment in education throughout life.

**The education landscape, in brief**

Ten percent of the world’s primary school age population is not in school – the majority of these children are excluded due to poverty, minority status, disability, gender and or because they live in urban slums and remote or rural areas. One in five adults – a total of 776 million – is illiterate and de facto excluded from meaningful participation in their societies. They are more vulnerable to ill health, poverty and exploitation. There are gaping inequalities in terms of educational opportunities. A child in Africa has less of a chance of finishing primary school than a European has of reaching tertiary education. In Africa, enrolment in tertiary education stands at a mere 5 percent, in South and West Asia at 9 percent and in East Asia at 22 percent.

High unemployment rates prevail among youth – an overriding concern in countries where the majority of the population is under 20. According to the ILO, 44% of the world’s unemployed are youth. Wage gaps between skilled and unskilled are a source of inequality and social polarization. The skills gap is fuelling inequality in both developing and industrialized countries and is a leading source of concern for governments. Again this calls for appropriate lifelong learning opportunities.

We cannot build just, sustainable, peaceful societies on these foundations. Educational disparities are simply not compatible with more equitable patterns of global integration. We have witnessed impressive progress in regions with the lowest educational levels since 2000 but much more determination, leadership and broad-based strategies are needed to make lifelong learning an organizing and guiding principle of education policy.

**Lifelong learning is rooted in rights**

Lifelong learning is far from being a new concept as many of you heard yesterday from Adama Ouane, director of our Institute for Lifelong Learning. Several international conventions and provisions relate to lifelong learning: UNESCO’s Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) covers adult education and continuing education as right, similar provisions are contained the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). These legal instruments exist and contain obligations which have a binding nature. They commit States Parties to translate these obligations into national education policies and programmes.

Lifelong learning means what it says – it is about opportunities to learn throughout life, in different settings, through different mediums. It calls for innovation and a more holistic,
flexible, open-minded way of looking at education. It is an education without a start and a finish. This is not a luxury because our knowledge-driven economies are increasingly reliant on an educated workforce capable of adapting to change. A country cannot be competitive with a weak skills base. In short there is an increasingly high premium placed on education in today’s knowledge-based economy. What have to follow are policies that enable appropriate life long learning opportunities to become accessible, at different stages of life, in different places, for different purposes. This represents a profound shift in how we organize education.

**Advancing the concept and practice of lifelong learning**

Over the past decade, multilateral institutions, governments and the private sector have advanced the concept and practice of lifelong learning, recognizing it as a necessity for growth and development. A number of key policy documents testify to this. The OECD has consistently conducted research on the links between economic competitiveness and lifelong learning opportunities. Since 2000, the European Union has made lifelong learning a key to the region becoming a knowledge hub by 2010. Through the Lisbon Strategy, Member States have agreed on the need for lifelong learning policies as a means for economic development. The European Commission has integrated its various educational and training initiatives under a single umbrella, the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), endowed with a $7 billion budget and programs focusing on schools, higher education, vocational education and training, and adult education.

At an international level, governments, bilateral and multilateral partners and civil society organizations are guided by a set of six time-bound targets – the Education for All goals adopted in 2000. These goals cover all stages of education. Goal 3 – the most difficult to monitor - refers more specifically to meeting the needs of young people and adults. The goals are rooted in a broad and humanistic vision of education. As the Declaration endorsed in 2000 reads, “all children young people, and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term…It is an education geared to tapping each individual’s talents and potential, and developing learners’ personalities, so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies.”

**What has to happen for lifelong learning to become rooted in our societies?**

First we have to ensure that education of adequate quality is available for everyone, and second to move towards more flexible, open education systems. We need to think about learning along a continuum, without losing sight of the need to set strong foundations and to pay particular attention to transitions between different stages of education. The starting point is to ensure that every child receives a basic education of adequate quality. This may be stating the obvious but it is not. A majority of countries have legislation making nine years of education compulsory but this is far from being a reality for many youth across the developing world.

In most European countries, a child’s education outside the home begins in kindergarten. Early childhood care and education programmes have the potential to offset disadvantage at an early age. They have an impact on a child’s cognitive development and subsequent achievement in primary school. This is why the Nobel economics laureate James Heckman considers early childhood care and education as one of the best social investments governments can make. Developing a lifelong learning policy calls for setting up national policies for young children. Although a number of developing countries have introduced early childhood care and education programmes in recent years, enrolment in them remains low and
children from more affluent, urban backgrounds tend to benefit most, digging an opportunity
gap in the first years of life.

The second challenge is of course to make primary education accessible to every child and to create sufficient places in secondary schools. I will not develop this point today but simply stress once again that specific measures are needed to reach the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and to work closely with parents and communities to improve the provision and management of education.

Third we must urgently address a quality deficit. Education is failing too many children and youth. International, regional and national learning assessments, including the OECD’s PISA, show that a significant share of students are not acquiring basic literacy and mathematics skills set out in the curriculum. The proportion of students scoring at the lowest level is much higher in developing countries. Inequalities in learning outcomes are closely linked to students’ socio-economic status, their language and ethnicity. The consequences of low learning achievement are serious, limiting a student’s chance to pursue studies and to find adequate employment when entering the job market for the first time.

**More flexible, open and innovative systems**

Today’s education systems are challenged to cater to an increasingly diverse student population and to ensure that students acquire basic skills and competencies to build their future. Curricula must respond to new demands of the global market and knowledge economy, providing skills such as communication, critical thinking, science and technology education and environmental knowledge. Transitions from one stage of education to the next call for particular vigilance. Are there enough places in school? Is cost an obstacle? How easily can an individual re-enter the learning circuit? How easy is it to shift from one education stream to another? How smooth and flexible are transitions to secondary education, to technical and vocational education, to higher levels of learning and to the world of work?

Throughout life, individuals have different needs and motivations to learn. We have to do away with prejudice based on age and to recognize that learning is a dynamic process. An adult’s decision to pursue studies of any nature is often guided by a real motivation to change. No profession today is static – being able to adapt to change, to choose a different career path is the very nature of work today. Creating closer linkages to labour markets are a leading concern for policy-makers.

Providing opportunities to learn throughout life calls for flexibility, openness and innovation. From an equity and rights perspective, lifelong learning for youth and adults encompasses second chance – but not second class - opportunities. They may involve literacy combined with life-skills, training and employment programmes, whether formal, non-formal or informal. To be attractive, such programmes need to be relevant, respectful of learners’ demands and expectations. The learning process itself has to be enriching, but so is the perspective of change at the end of it.

Lifelong learning calls for closer integration between the world of learning and the world of work. It implies turning institutions and companies into learning organizations in which professional development is encouraged and valued. For institutions of learning, it means recognizing the value of experience acquired through work, in non-formal and informal settings. A lifelong learning policy encourages learning in diverse settings, through diverse pathways.
In recent years a number of countries have established explicit lifelong learning policies.

Let me briefly provide a few examples.

The Republic of Korea introduced a Credit Bank System that recognizes various learning experiences as credits and awards academic degrees and qualifications. It aims to provide citizens with greater access to different learning systems and to recognize their different learning activities. The Lifelong Education Act of 2007 makes it compulsory for local governments to establish their own lifelong education promotion plans, and to form regional committees to implement them. The policy is to provide tailored learning programmes and schemes throughout life.

In Thailand a learning credit system enables learners to transfer between different types of educational institutions, including from NFE or informal education, vocational training or work experience. A law enacted earlier this year, in February 2008, relates to the provision of non formal and informal education.

The South African Development Community has a committee specifically charged with promoting lifelong education training as an integral part of all education and training.

Finally, lifelong learning entails a change in culture, in our attitudes towards learning. Initiatives such as “Learning Cities” and Learning Festivals that now exist in a number of countries celebrate adults who continue their education and aim to put learning within everyone’s reach.

There are consequences to not building lifelong learning into career paths. Take the case of teachers. At a time when some 18 million teachers are needed just to reach primary education by 2015, the profession is going through a crisis due to deteriorating working conditions and often lack of professional development opportunities. Examples from several countries illustrate that providing such opportunities can motivate teachers to stay in the profession.

**Linking this forum to UNESCO’s four conferences**

Let me briefly end on how this forum is relevant to several of UNESCO’s initiatives over the next year. Next month the International Conference on Education will focus on inclusion. Education systems can foster inclusion in different ways, especially through providing equitable access to education at all stages of life and through more open and flexible links and transitions between formal and non-formal education.

You have heard from the director of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning about CONFINTEA, the international conference on adult education. This Conference will be a tremendously important occasion for mobilizing political will around adult learning and recommending strategies for developing national lifelong learning policies. Two other conferences, on education for sustainable development and on higher education and research, complete the cycle. All these conferences are based on the conviction that education is a right and a foundation for development, and that learning happens throughout life. They aim to encourage a move towards more flexible innovative education systems grounded in a concern for equity, inclusion and quality.
Let me end by emphasizing the importance of partnerships for lifelong learning, because education is a societal project. Everyone has a role in promoting learning societies – starting with governments, but also the private sector, foundations, civil society organizations and the media. As the Delors report stated in 1996, “choosing a type of education means choosing a type of society”. Each national education system faces its specific challenges but all levels and types of education must support each other and contribute to the emergence of learning societies.

This calls for political leadership and financial engagement over the long term, and a stronger compact between developing and industrialized countries to encourage the emergence of lifelong learning education systems. The challenge is tremendous because of the enormous disparities in learning opportunities that exist today. In our different capacities, our shared responsibility is to promote access to learning at all stages of life. This carries benefits for individuals and for the building of more dynamic, cohesive and just societies.