CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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AT THE PLENARY MINISTERIAL FORUM

OF THE 35TH UNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE

(Paris, 8 October, 2009)
Mr. President of the General Conference,
Mr. Chairman of the Executive Board,
Mr. Director-General,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am privileged to deliver this keynote address in the Plenary Ministerial Forum of the UNESCO General Conference convening for the first time.

I am also honoured to be the first Turkish President to address the General Conference.

Mr. President of the General Conference, I congratulate you warmly for your recent election to this important post.

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Universal institutions like UNESCO that bridge divides and unite nations around common values should continue playing important roles in our times.

By promoting collaboration among nations in the fields of education, science and culture, UNESCO has already proven to be an essential tool for the promotion of a culture of peace in the world.

It should continue to be so.
Because all and each of UNESCO’s fields of activity are fundamental requirements for our peoples to benefit fully from globalization.

These are also fundamental to confront and remedy the challenges we face, as the current global economic crisis.

Therefore, UNESCO, as a part of the United Nations family, should remain decidedly the lead agency in the core areas of education, science, culture and communication.

No doubt, this Ministerial Forum will provide a platform in trying to find creative solutions to current global challenges and improving UNESCO’s role in handling them.

The two topics to be discussed today are indeed very relevant in this regard.

I hope that today’s deliberations will serve as a guide to UNESCO and its Member States in their work to overcome these challenges.

And I hope words will be supported by deeds.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have come to Paris from Istanbul where we hosted the World Bank and IMF annual meetings.

Naturally, the consequences of the global economic-financial crisis was at the top of the agenda.

Deep concerns, but also hopes were pronounced.

The need for learning lessons from this serious crisis and moving on with joint and coordinated action were stressed.

Therefore, I think the choice of topics for the Ministerial Forum is very
relevant to the global agenda of today.

Indeed, the current international economic and financial crisis has clearly proven that an improved global governance is of key importance.

The remedies of the past are not adequate to address the present challenges in economic, social and political spheres.

In this context, the demand for a new and reinvigorated multilateralism is pressing.

And this also relates to UNESCO’s fields of activity.

Excellencies,

During times of financial and economic crisis, temptation may be strong for governments to cut first in social sectors.

This temptation must be resisted.

On the other hand, we must see that, even a fraction of the large sums spent to stimulate the economies and bailout the banks, would mean large investments for schools, museums or laboratories.

Due to their link to economy, the case for investing in education and science is more apparent.

Culture also needs investment during times of crisis.

For example, one might ask what does cultural heritage protection have to do with the economic-financial crisis?

However, we well know that during any kind of crisis, human beings need the feeling of security, stability and confidence in their lives more than ever.

Stability means continuity and continuity is a defining aspect of cultural heritage.
Looking at a centuries old monument built by our ancestors that has stood through wars and troubled times, or listening to a song or a poem that has existed for centuries makes us feel self-confident and gives us a sense of stability and continuity.

Therefore, investing in the protection of cultural heritage means helping the strengthening of our societies especially at times of crises, economic crisis or cultural identity crisis.

Excellencies,

UNESCO also has a preeminent role in promoting cultural diversity and dialogue among cultures.

As a driver of economic and social progress, cultural diversity should be integrated in development strategies and country level programs.

In this regard, International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures 2010 to be led by UNESCO is timely.

In our interconnected world, not a single society is isolated from chronic or new problems like terrorism, racism, xenophobia, gender or religious based forms of discrimination, among them Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

We should remember that economic-financial crises and unemployment create conditions where extremist views thrive and find greater audiences.

I am deeply concerned that a rise in extremism might generate new conflicts and tragedies in addition to the existing ones among which Palestine is the foremost.

Therefore, fostering mutual understanding is key to effective conflict
UNESCO is well-placed to work across frontiers and continents to enhance cultural exchange and inter-cultural harmony.

The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative launched by Turkey and Spain under the auspices of the UN with UNESCO’s participation is a concrete step in this direction.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Never in history has it been more pressing to invest in education, as a major driver, in building inclusive and equitable societies.

Indeed, education is essential not only for development, but also for fostering mutual understanding and respect between cultures.

Education is also an essential right for all.

And removing all obstacles to this end should continue to be a high priority on the agendas of governments, international organizations as well as civil society.

UNESCO has central role to play in this process, as manifested in its leadership in initiatives such as Education for All, the UN Literacy Decade and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

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Previous experiences show that the negative impact of an economic depression is first felt on women and girls.

Therefore, taking appropriate measures to protect the gains of gender equality efforts must be one of our priorities.
Additional financing should be channelled to the most vulnerable.

Moreover, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries should keep their place among the priorities of UNESCO’s education agenda.

In this respect, North-South and South-South cooperation schemes should be encouraged.

Official development assistance for education must be kept at least at current levels.

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The broader use of information technologies in education is becoming essential.

In this connection, open and distance learning will have a decisive role in effectively training people at reasonable costs.

UNESCO Member States should share their good practices in this area.

I am proud to say, in Turkey, Anadolu (Anatolia) University which offers distance education to more than one and a half million undergraduate students is an internationally recognized distance learning example.

With our expertise, we are ready to contribute to developing distance learning projects.

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Lifelong learning is another important subject.

Economic crisis has once again proven that lifelong learning, offering greater workforce flexibility, can be a valuable asset against unemployment.

Technical and vocational education and training can contribute to
employment creation and productivity and they promote economic
development.

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Scientific progress, both in the natural and social sciences, has proven to be essential for sustainable development.

The magnitude of global challenges of today, such as climate change, require more than ever the wise application of innovative solutions.

UNESCO National Commissions, UNESCO Chairs and Associated Schools Project Network should assume roles in the sharing and propagation of scientific and technological experience.

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We should all be mindful that the economic and financial crisis should not negatively affect democratic reform processes and human rights standards.

Because, neither democracy nor sustainable economic development is conceivable without freedom of expression.

In this regard, the sensitivity of UNESCO about the independence and safety of the media and its professionals is justified and appropriate.

Best practices and professional and ethical guidelines should be encouraged always with due respect to the principle of freedom of expression.

Excellencies,

UNESCO’s priorities are already set by the Medium Term Strategy.

Within this perspective, Africa and gender equality deserve special attention, especially under the global crisis conditions.
Turkey shares and supports those priorities.

I had earlier mentioned the need for deeds to support words.

For example, with regard to Africa, Turkey has launched an “Outreach to Africa” policy in 2005. We convened the “Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit” last year. Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency, (TICA), and several Turkish NGOs are already serving people across Africa.

Working to achieve gender equality is also a priority for Turkey.

We still have much to do but the following are some of our achievements regarding the representation of women in different sectors:

- 40 percent of university academics,
- 54 percent of health professionals,
- 33 percent of law professionals and
- 27 percent of diplomats in Turkey are women.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this point I would like to pay tribute to Director General Mr. Matsuura for having initiated necessary reforms to improve the performance of the Organization.

Without these efforts, UNESCO would have been less prepared in the face of global challenges and requirements, among them the current economic crisis.

As one of the twenty founding members of UNESCO, Turkey looks forward to working closely with the new Director-General also.

I am fully assured that, enriched with valuable and much-needed ideas such as the «new humanism», as formulated by Mrs. Irina Bokova in
her vision paper, and with her focus on the “One UN” offer, UNESCO will continue to lead our common endeavour:

An endeavour towards the creation of more just and prosperous societies based on knowledge, tolerance and equal opportunities for all through education, science and culture in peace and harmony.

Thank you for your attention.