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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
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联合国教育、
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Address by Mrs Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the opening of the Sixth UNESCO

International Conference on Adult Education

(CONFINTEA VI)

Belém, Brazil, 1 December 2009

Mr Fernando Haddad, Minister of Education of Brazil,
Madame Ana Júlia Carepa, Governor of the State of Pará,
Your Excellency Alpha Oumar Konaré, Former President of Mali
Your Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have travelled from over 150 countries to this historic city of Belém, set on the banks of two majestic rivers that flow from the Amazon rain forest, one of the great lungs of our planet. At the invitation of the Government of Brazil, the Sixth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education convenes for the first time in the Southern Hemisphere, in the home country of the late Paulo Freire, one of the world's most celebrated adult educators.

Our presence here is symbolic for many reasons. We are in a region that embodies the global challenge of responsible and sustainable development of the Earth's precious resources. We are in a vast country that harbours a tremendously rich linguistic

and cultural diversity and counts among the world's largest emerging economies. It is a country staunchly committed to education and the reduction of poverty and inequality – to a model of sustainable growth that is the key to building more just and peaceful societies.

As we have learned from Paulo Freire, learning throughout life helps us to understand our world and to shape it – individually and collectively. In his words, “Nobody is completely ignorant. Nobody knows everything. All of us lack knowledge of something. That is why we continue to learn”. Today, in Belém, we join forces in this spirit to carry on the legacy of this inspiring educationalist and world citizen.

We are here to demonstrate the power of adult learning and education to ensure a viable future for all. Our goal over the next four days is to take forward the agenda of adult learning and education by securing stronger political recognition of its critical importance for development and agreeing on concrete recommendations to increase its scope and reach.

As we all know, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 enshrined everyone's right to education. Even now, over 60 years later, we still need to reiterate that this right extends to children, youth and adults.

At all stages of life, education is transformative. It empowers individuals with the knowledge and skills to better their lives. More broadly, it opens the way to active citizenship and democratic participation. Evidence shows that it impacts on economic growth

and per-capita income. This is why the provision of good quality learning opportunities throughout life is one of the smartest strategies for reducing inequalities and promoting more harmonious and just societies.

Adult learning counts more than ever in the era of globalization. Economic integration, technology, migration and the complexity of global challenges place a high premium on knowledge and skills. Rapidly growing economies such as Brazil's are highly dependent on expertise in all domains, from agriculture to health. No country has ever climbed the human development ladder without steady investment in lifelong learning.

Literacy is the point of departure of comprehensive lifelong learning policies. Today, one in six adults – a staggering 774 million – cannot 'read the world' as Paulo Freire would put it because they lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Sixty-seven percent of these adults are women, with dramatic consequences for the well-being of their children and families. We cannot build a viable future on these grounds. Such educational disparities – between people, regions and countries – are simply not compatible with a fairer globalization.

We have committed to change this. In 2000, all countries adopted an ambitious set of goals to improve human well-being. The Millennium Development Goals are precisely about rendering human dignity to the excluded, reducing the unacceptable incidence of poverty, hunger, maternal and infant mortality and HIV and AIDS. They are about access to education and gender equality because we cannot build a better future when

discrimination against girls and women persists. The six Education for All goals adopted the same year chart out a comprehensive agenda to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults. Two relate directly to our meeting today: achieving a 50 percent increase in levels of adult literacy by 2015 and providing equitable access to learning and life-skills programs for young people and adults. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and the UN Literacy Decade are two further international frameworks to help fulfill the right to education.

Integrating adult learning and education into poverty reduction strategies and related social and economic policies is key to further progress towards the Millennium Development Goals because knowledge and skills are essential to improve livelihoods.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today informed by the recommendations of preparatory conferences in Budapest, Lyon, Mexico City, Nairobi, Seoul and Tunis. Regional reports synthesizing the state of adult learning and education were presented and debated at each of these conferences, based on an impressive 154 national reports submitted by Member States. This is proof of a remarkable commitment to adult learning – and to the CONFINTEA process.

Because the field of adult learning is highly diverse, it is difficult to define and monitor. But if we are to secure stronger political recognition of adult learning, we need sound evidence, cases of

best practice and tested policies. To this end, UNESCO has produced the first-ever Global Report on Adult Learning and Education that will be presented this afternoon. Based on data collected from countries and other research, it makes a highly convincing case for adult learning and education. The Report shows that countries in all regions have put in place adult learning strategies and legislation. They have run literacy campaigns, forged new partnerships and made innovative use of information communication technologies. But these initiatives need scaling up. Exclusion prevails in all regions. Low participation among groups who stand to benefit most from adult education maintains a cycle of poverty and inequity. Adult learning is chronically underfunded and tends to suffer from poor coordination among the various partners involved.

It is evident that much more needs to be done. Twelve years ago in Hamburg, CONFINTEA V established learning as “a right, a tool, a joy and a shared responsibility.” So how do we make this a reality? We need effective, transparent and accountable action for lifelong learning. We need to align our actions with our words, by creating the conditions for young people and adults to benefit from relevant and empowering learning programmes. This calls for more sensitivity to learners’ needs, language and culture, better trained educators and an all round culture of quality. We need better coordination of all partners and significantly higher levels of funding, with a systematic focus on serving the most disadvantaged groups, especially women and rural populations.

None of these objectives will be achieved without the active commitment of all partners within and across countries. This is one of the reasons why we are here. Lifelong learning policies involve not only education stakeholders but also public administrations, private sector partners and civil society organizations. All must join forces for adult learning to really take off and show its full potential.

Ladies and gentlemen,

International conferences provide us with important opportunities to share knowledge, define priorities and recommend a course of action. What really matters is to translate our commitments into comprehensive national policies that benefit youth and adults, especially the most vulnerable.

To support the follow-up to CONFINTEA VI, UNESCO has prepared a draft Belém Framework for Action that you will discuss, enrich and I trust adopt by the end of the Conference. This draft framework is based on the regional synthesis reports and outcome documents, and has already been distributed to you. The document makes a great effort to balance what is desirable and forward-looking with what is realistic and possible for a world community with very diverse conditions and resources. A special section is dedicated to the international monitoring of the recommendations and strategies to be adopted here. I am confident that you will finalize and adopt the framework with a shared sense of responsibility.

Learning happens every day, throughout our life, bringing enrichment, openness and a sense of possibility. UNESCO is committed to this comprehensive vision of learning at all ages. CONFINTEA VI is the fourth international conference on education organized by UNESCO since November 2008. Each one has focused from different perspectives on how to build inclusive, innovative, high-quality education systems that serve the needs of all learners.

As we begin, I would like extend my warmest thanks to the Ministry of Education of Brazil and to the State of Para for so generously hosting this Conference. We are all the more grateful in light of the tremendous efforts you made to reschedule it. There is a silver lining in every cloud: in this case the change in timing has given me the great privilege to attend as Director-General of UNESCO. Let me reiterate our appreciation for your sizeable financial contribution and your steadfast commitment to adult learning. I am confident that a new momentum for adult learning will be born here in Belém and carried across lands and oceans to learners throughout the world.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express my great pleasure that Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, UNESCO's new Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, is with us today. It is my sincere hope that drawing on your commitment and expertise, UNESCO will make progress in further increasing the literacy rates of children, youth and adults.

I cannot close without mention of the current financial and economic crisis that has spread from high rise corporate banks to

towns and villages the world over. It is hitting the most vulnerable hardest and making our world more insecure. Behind forecasts of curtailed growth, deeper poverty and job losses lies a human tragedy that we must act to avert with intelligence and vision. Investing in adult learning and education is to invest in hope and opportunity. It is part of the way out of the crisis. At each of the three major education conferences that I just mentioned, ministers and top-ranking officials stressed that the financial crisis should not serve as a justification for reducing resources for education. This is more than ever a time to reinforce cooperation and partnership – between North and South, among countries of the South, between governments, multilateral and bilateral partners and civil society – because education is a societal project. It is more than ever the time for bilateral partners to respect their commitments to education and recognize the power of adult learning for turning poverty into opportunity.

We have a historic mission: to make a difference. Let us agree now to use this high profile opportunity here in Brazil over the next few days to find ways to harness the power of adult learning and education to make the world more just, peaceful and viable. Let us commit ourselves to take action when we return to our respective countries. It would be the most fitting of all tributes to Paulo Freire and to all those youth and adults who are not benefiting from the precious right to learn – it is a condition of human freedom.

Thank you very much.