Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

Global Education for All Meeting

Opening Speech

12-14 May 2014
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

His Highness Sayyid Asa’ad bin Tariq Al Said, Representative of His Majesty the Sultan of Oman,

Your Excellency Mr Matata Ponyo, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Excellency Dr Madiha bint Ahmed Al Shaibaniya, Minister of Education of the Sultanate of Oman,

Ms Kate Gilmore, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Populations Fund,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank His Majesty the Sultan of Oman for this initiative.
This reflects a deep commitment to quality education, through an effective education system, through gender parity in primary and secondary, through a long engagement with education for sustainable development.

Let me thank also Mr Matata Ponyo, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, for his presence and personal commitment to education.

It is an honour to be in Muscat for this first Global Education for All Meeting in the Arab region.

This is also the last before 2015 and the *World Education Forum* that will be held in the Republic of Korea.

This is a moment to craft a strong joint commitment – a *Muscat Agreement* -- for an ambitious future education agenda, which meets the needs and rights of every girl and boy.

The universal right to education is still contested in some places.

I take this opportunity to condemn the abduction of more than 270 girls in Nigeria by extremist groups.

This is an unacceptable violation of human rights.

It is an attack against the aspirations of these girls.

It is also an attack against the future of Nigeria.
No belief can justify this act.

Our response to such extremism is clear.

We must never relent in providing every girl and boy with a quality education.

We must never tire in supporting education as a force for human dignity and sustainable development.

This is the spirit of the Malala Fund for Girls’ Right to Education I was honoured to launch with the Government of Pakistan in Islamabad this February.

This is the goal of UNESCO’s Enhancement of Literacy Programme to reach 600,000 learners throughout Afghanistan – I was in Kabul one year ago, when I heard the aspirations of Afghan girls and how much education means to them.

There has been remarkable progress since 2000.

Between 1999 and 2011, the number of children out of primary school fell by almost half.

India has reduced the number of children out-of-school from 20 to less than two million, while Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education.
And we have just heard how the host country, the Sultanate of Oman, achieved gender parity twenty years ago. This is a remarkable achievement.

This shows what can be done when there is political will and resources.

But, as UNESCO’s *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* shows, we are not there yet.

Some 57 million children and 69 million adolescents still do not have access to education -- half of them live in conflict situations.

I wish to highlight the plight of young Syrian girls and boys. In Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, UNESCO is supporting the education of displaced refugee youth – I see this both as a humanitarian and a security issue.

More widely, 250 million children are not learning the basics even after four years in school.

Girls are hit hardest.

In low and lower-middle income countries, 100 million young women are unable to read a single sentence.
In 2011, 60 percent of countries had achieved gender parity in primary education – in secondary, the figure drops to 38 percent.

This carries unacceptable costs for human development, as we know the power of girls’ education for reducing infant and child mortality, for civic engagement, for protecting the environment, for economic and social empowerment.

This global learning crisis is compounded by a deep financial gap.

Basic education is underfunded by $26 billion a year and international aid is declining *precisely* when countries need it most.

These false economies hold hostage all efforts for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

With some 500 days before 2015, we need an urgent new push for success.

This is the goal of the *Global Education First Initiative*, launched by the United Nations Secretary-General, steered forward by UNESCO – this initiative has gained high-level support through Champion Countries and wide range of partners.
Across the world, UNESCO is working to accelerate progress towards Education for All – supporting, most notably, the Big Push of African countries, including Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, Senegal and Lesotho, Angola and Swaziland.

Permettez-moi d’ailleurs de féliciter à cet égard la République Démocratique du Congo, Monsieur le premier Ministre, pour son engagement à bâtir un système éducatif plus efficace et plus inclusif, afin d’assurer l’enseignement primaire gratuit pour tous, à travers la construction de 1000 nouvelles classes cette année et les années suivantes, et la formation des enseignants, avec le programme de l’UNESCO financé par la Chine.

La réussite passe en effet par la formation des enseignants, et c’est l’objectif de la campagne mondiale de l’Internationale de l’Education : « Unissons-nous pour une éducation de qualité ».

Cet objectif nous appelle à mobiliser les nouvelles technologies pour atteindre les exclus et améliorer la qualité de l’apprentissage.

Cet objectif nous appelle à forger de nouveaux partenariats.

C'est pourquoi j'ai lancé le Partenariat mondial pour l’éducation des filles et des femmes en 2011, en étroite collaboration avec de grandes entreprises privées.
Nous devons accélérer nos efforts jusqu’en 2015, pour consolider les fondements du programme de développement qui doit suivre.

Le programme mondial de développement durable post 2105 doit être universel, fondé sur les droits humains, et ambitieux.

Ensemble avec les États membres, en coopération avec l'UNICEF, l'UNESCO préconise un seul grand objectif dédié à l’éducation:

« Garantir à tous une éducation de qualité équitable et inclusive, tout au long de la vie, d'ici à 2030. »

Et permettez-moi d’insister et de le répéter en anglais, car c’est important aussi dans le cadre des négociations :

« To ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030.”

This should be translated into measurable targets for access, for free and compulsory education through lower secondary, for relevant learning outcomes, for financing and for new values, skills and attitudes.

We need to craft a new vision of education for the 21st century.
A vision for quality, lifelong education, founded on equity and inclusion.

A vision of education for global citizenship and sustainable development – building on the *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*, which UNESCO leads, that closes this year with the *World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development* in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, this November.

This is the spirit of the Statement that will be adopted here in Muscat.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Shaping this new education agenda is the responsibility of Governments.

Implementing it calls for wide partnership – working with civil society at all levels, including Non-Governmental Organizations, as during the meeting in Santiago de Chile later this month.

It calls also for a new approach to the private sector -- let me highlight here the *Business Backs Education* campaign launched at the *Global Education and Skills Conference*, organized in partnership with UNESCO, in Dubai this March.
This is a key lesson of the past 15 years – we need stronger partnerships for accountability, for innovation, for effective action.

Education is the best long-term investment a society can make in a more inclusive, sustainable and just future.

These are the stakes - they are very high. We must meet them, and I am convinced we can if we work together.

Thank you.