

**STATEMENT OF MR. DENNIS FRANCIS, REPRESENTATIVE OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO IN THE
PLENARY DEBATE OF THE 202nd SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF UNESCO, UNESCO
HEADQUARTERS, PARIS, TUESDAY 10th OCTOBER, 2017.**

Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Bureau
Madame Director General,
Colleague Members of the Board.

We are convened in this 202nd Session at a time of mounting international tension and uncertainty, with all the attendant risks. This tension manifests itself in various forms, whether through the real threat of nuclear proliferation and confrontation or through the forced migration of multitudes from their homelands, triggered in so many instances by the refusal of some to accept, respect and value human diversity and human dignity. In the midst of it all, we must as an international community of shared values that elevate the dignity and worth of the human person above all else, confront violent extremism and radicalization that continue to ignite the perpetration of acts of terrorism, on grand scales and on small ones. Violence as means of self-expression as well as hate is increasingly an everyday occurrence in our time. Let us recall for example, the recent stabbing of two young American girls in the South of France apparently, the French authorities have informed us, simply because they are Americans. This is most alarming. We must never regard violence as either acceptable or legitimate, less it becomes the norm that defines modern society.

I am convinced that with all the confrontation, conflict and discord that envelopes us in the world today that if UNESCO did not exist, it would have to be created. As an engine for creating and deepening tolerance, respect, conciliation, dialogue and understanding among People's, this is a unique organization that brings extraordinary value to the unending search for Peace, Progress and Security, by making strategic investments, both in the short and long term, in human and social capital, with decisive incremental results. As we prioritise Agenda 2030 in the work programme of the Organization, no one, I am sure, would question the critical importance of bolstering even further our attention to the issues that impact our youth, especially in so far as they may feel disenfranchised, disconnected from the core values and currents of society. Can we risk abandoning them? And if they are abandoned would opportunists of ill intent not fill the waiting vacuum in order to exploit their vulnerable exposure, with all the consequential risks to their future and to their societies?

These scenarios constitute the very antithesis of Agenda 2030, that of connecting people to values, ideas and principles that inspire and motivate them to become self-empowered, productive upstanding members of their communities and societies, thus creating strong, resilient, progressive societies in harmony with themselves, with each other and with the planet. Education and lifelong learning really is the key that unlocks the door to social mobility. My own country, Trinidad and Tobago, is a living example of this. In Trinidad and Tobago, it is not unusual that working class families transform themselves through education and training to middle class status in a single generation, because at independence our First Prime Minister, who incidentally had great faith in the promise of this Organization, told us "the future of the nation lies in your school bags." This

upward mobility has been made possible through persistent heavy investments in education and training over the last 53 years as an independent nation. In fact Mr. President, The Budget for Fiscal 2018 has just been presented in the national Parliament and the Education Sector has received the largest proportion of the budget.

That is why Trinidad and Tobago attaches such high importance to UNESCO's work in the field of education generally, and in that regard, to its unique and inspired leadership in mobilizing and building momentum towards the achievement of SDG4. In this regard, we give high priority to Technical and Vocational Education and Training and while thanking the Director General and her team for energizing this aspect of the education pillar, we would like to see even greater emphasis and focus on it, so as to create credible alternative pathways to remunerative employment, including self-employment, for students wishing to pursue the varied options available in this area.

Mindful of the critical role and contribution of science and innovation in wealth creation and development, Trinidad and Tobago urges a renewed focus on science by UNESCO. So many of the challenges that confound our world today have their genesis in science, Climate Change, preserving biodiversity, pandemic diseases, ocean sustainability, the availability of water etc. An initiative to popularize science in Trinidad and Tobago through a makeshift roving exhibition culminated in the establishment of a permanent National Science Centre approximately two years ago.

The purpose of the Centre is to highlight the role and power of science in shaping people's everyday lives, using some 200 interactive exhibits on such themes as Animation, Energy, the Environment, Disaster Awareness, the Human Body, Sports and Wellness, Creativity and Innovation, Physical Disabilities and Robotics. The Centre is open to everyone to view the exhibits but children of school age are specially targeted considering that they are the future inventors and innovators. The Centre is intended to fire their imagination and to ignite that spark of scientific inquisitiveness in them so that they can understand that science is real, it is all around them and they too can become scientists. By returning science to the centre-stage of UNESCO's work and building further on its strong external linkages, we feel that much progress would be possible, working with local communities and governments across all regions, in creating a culture of creativity and innovation in support of sustainable development.

It is understood that UNESCO is at an important crossroad in its evolution. Sometimes, when one listens to the dialogue one senses that there exists the perception in some places that reform is an event. Trinidad and Tobago takes an alternative view, namely that in its best conception, reform is a process. Allow me therefore to remind the house, Mr. President, that UNESCO is currently in the throes of reform and has been for some time led ably by the Director – General. So let us be judicious and realistic going forward. Yes, we need greater efficiency and deeper impact, yes we must rethink programme content and delivery to cut out waste and duplication, and yes, we must expand and augment our capabilities by strategic partnering with other Organizations and entities in the research and scientific community to create and exploit synergies that can strengthen our efforts to achieve real deliverables that change people's lives by empowering them and their societies. But we must be careful, enormously careful, not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

As a practical matter, we are enjoined to rethink and to re-engineer this Organization in order that it is better positioned to lead the delivery of the services and support required to bring into fruition,

at country level, SDG 4. It is, quite frankly, something of a conundrum in that we are tasking the Organization to do quite a lot, against the backdrop of persistent operating deficits and with limited prospects for full re-capitalization in the short term. This is a most unfortunate situation for the Organization, having particular regard to the nature and origins of the shortfall. It is our hope therefore, that when we rise from this Session, we will have reached a broad and therefore strong consensus on the contours of UNESCO's Programme and Budget for the next biennium – bearing in mind that the foundation for the subsequent rollout of work towards SDG 4 will have to be laid over the next two years.

Recent catastrophic events have dramatized the risks and indeed the devastating potential of the environment in creating suffering, human misery and premature loss of life. I join others in expressing our solidarity with the Governments and Peoples of all those countries that have been directly impacted by these extreme climatic and environmental events. In my own region, the Caribbean, the extent of destruction and dislocation has been unimaginable, and given our location and our geographical realities as Small Island Developing States, the risk of recurrence or, more aptly said, the likelihood of recurrence is extremely high because hurricane systems are cyclical phenomena, occurring in the Atlantic Basin every year. Mr. President, it is not an over-exaggeration to say that the Atlantic hurricane season poses an existential threat to the People and economies of the Caribbean and therefore to their sustainable development.

That is why we are today underscoring the need to amplify UNESCO's work in support of SIDS as a matter of priority. It simply cannot wait if we are serious about protecting and empowering the vulnerable and marginalized by way of inclusion. When schools are blown away and basic infrastructure such as desks and chairs are not available, there is no capacity for children to carry on their schooling, placing their future and that of their communities at even greater risk. In this connection, I proud to share with this house the fact the Government of Trinidad and Tobago which is already facing severe challenges in meeting the magnitude of need in its education system has offered and already accepted a sizeable number of children from countries such as Dominica, placement in schools in Trinidad and Tobago, particularly those who are schedule to write their secondary school exams over the next two or so years. A more comprehensive SIDS agenda in UNESCO will add substantial value to nationally driven efforts in the Caribbean and other SIDS to achieve SDG4 within the larger framework of Agenda 2030, to which Trinidad and Tobago and its partners in the Caribbean Community are fully committed.

Let me end Mr. President, by expressing to our outgoing Director General, Mrs Irena Bukova, our grateful thanks for her successful stewardship of this unique Organization for Human Development , Peace and Global Security.

**Port of Spain.
October, 2017**