Meeting of National Commissions
on the occasion of the 205th session of the Executive Board
(9-10 October 2018, Room XII, UNESCO HQs)

First Day, 9 October 2018

After welcoming the participants, Mr Nicolas Kassianides, ADG/ERI a.i., proposed Mr Oscar León González, President of the Cuban National Commission for UNESCO, as Chairperson of the meeting, in accordance with the practice of geographical rotation and on the basis of informal discussions. Mr González was then elected Chairperson by acclamation.

The Chairperson moved to the adoption of the agenda and then invited ADG/ERI a.i. to deliver an opening address.

ADG/ERI a.i. began his address by referring to the Fifth Interregional Meeting of National Commissions, held in Diani (Kenya) in June 2018 and in which he had participated. He stated that it was an important milestone for the Organization, because it had been particularly fruitful in terms of exchanges between National Commissions and the Secretariat, in particular with regard to the Strategic Transformation and the role of the National Commissions. In that respect, ADG/ERI a.i. emphasized the importance of the National Commissions, which were an essential component of the Organization. He welcomed the cooperation between National Commissions and the Secretariat, and wondered how best to involve them in the strategic transformation process. He said that while retaining its two main priorities (Africa and gender equality), UNESCO was repositioning itself as leader of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and becoming more sophisticated in terms of data production and of standards. He also referred to some of UNESCO’s major initiatives, including the flagship initiative “Reviving the Mosul Spirit”, which aimed to rebuild the heritage of Mosul while revitalizing the city’s cultural, educational and human life. With regard to the ethics of science, he said that UNESCO should retain its function as a laboratory of ideas, and noted in that connection that an event on artificial intelligence and Africa would be held in December 2018 in Marrakesh.

ADG/ERI a.i. went on to inform the participants that, following the Interregional Meeting in Diani, the Director-General had proposed that $305,000 of the unspent balance be set aside for National Commission activities, including for training to strengthen their operational capacities. Several countries, such as Germany and the Republic of Korea, had already conducted such training. An online platform for National Commissions was also being developed to strengthen cooperation between the Secretariat and National Commissions and enable more direct consultation of them. In that respect, he wished to reiterate his support for the consultations held in parallel with governing body sessions on a regular basis. In that connection, he recalled the Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting, held in September 2018 in the Republic of Korea and also mentioned that a Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Meeting would take place on 22 and 23 November 2018 in Montevideo.

The Chairperson opened the floor for debate. Several speakers took the floor.

While supporting the Strategic Transformation process and internal reform of the Secretariat so as to facilitate dialogue, a participant called for more information on artificial intelligence and ethics. He also asked the total number of National Commissions in the world.

One participant asked how the National Commissions would be asked to contribute in the Strategic Transformation process and said that his country was interested in examining the challenges related to technology. It was recalled that the National Commissions of West Africa had produced a training manual for National Commission staff.

One participant stressed the importance of continuing to give priority to Africa despite the difficult budgetary situation.
One participant welcomed the DG’s proposal to allocate $305,000 to the National Commissions. In his view, as new Secretaries-General had no link with UNESCO, it was important to train the National Commission staff. He welcomed ADG/ERI a.i.’s support for the National Commissions.

ADG/ERI a.i. expressed the hope that the National Commissions would be able to benefit from the unspent funds in order to start training straightaway.

He expressed profound condolences to Indonesia for the natural disaster that had devastated the country. In response to a question, he said that there were a total of 201 National Commissions in 194 Member States and 7 Associate Members. He confirmed that Priority Africa was maintained; it was still at the core of the Organization’s mandate and would be strengthened in the work of UNESCO as a cross-cutting theme. He thanked Kenya for organizing the most recent interregional meeting of National Commissions. He encouraged participants to share their ideas on how to organize the dialogue between National Commissions and the Secretariat. He reiterated that the Secretariat stood ready to work together to find the most effective structure for dialogue.

Mr Xing Qu, Deputy Director-General (DDG), addressed the meeting and gave a presentation on the Strategic Transformation process.

Expressing his appreciation for the opportunity to meet the National Commissions for the first time, the DDG reiterated the need for the Organization to be engaged in the process in order to achieve even more ambitious goals, despite the significant constraints and challenges of living in a very rapidly changing environment. In his view, it was the ideal moment, because the United Nations was also in the midst of reform. UNESCO had lost 30% of its financial support, and other agencies, such as UNICEF, were carrying out work in UNESCO’s traditional fields of action, leading to strategic reflection on the Organization’s positioning. The Organization must again become a leader with an added value and comparative advantage. It must also open up to civil society, to NGOs and to the private sector, and UNESCO’s way of working must be modernized with better management. UNESCO’s reform should be cross-cutting and involve all sectors.

The DDG provided examples of the progress made: there were four working groups – one focusing on operational effectiveness, one on strategic partnerships, one on communication and one on the Organization’s presence in the world. The strategic transformation process had thus been launched successfully; 59 volunteers (25% of them from field offices) and a support unit were working on it; a list of 24 proposals had been compiled from among the more than 450 current internal and external audit recommendations, and finally, a strategic transformation newsletter had been launched to provide information on the status of the process. The DG also considered that it was important to invite public figures from outside to inform the debate.

The Chairperson opened a brief question-and-answer session. Three participants asked questions about how the National Commissions’ enormous resource of ideas could be used, and which 24 audit recommendations/proposals had been selected. The DDG assured participants that he and his team were ready to discuss all proposed suggestions.

(Suspension)
Second Day - 10 October 2018

The Chairperson opened the meeting by recalling briefly what had been said the previous day. He then gave the floor to representatives of the National Commissions who wished to present their initiatives.

The French National Commission joined the appreciation already expressed by other National Commissions for the organization of the Interregional Meeting in Diani. On that occasion, the French Commission had proposed to circulate a list of the key responsibilities incumbent upon the National Commissions. The list would serve as a basis for a study on National Commissions’ contribution to UNESCO’s Strategic Transformation: it would identify skills transfer and shared responsibility with the Secretariat, compare the workloads of National Commissions, present the value added of National Commissions to national authorities, and mobilize additional financial resources. An initial identification of those tasks had been conducted on the basis of a document prepared by the Secretariat, and the French National Commission wished to circulate it throughout the network of National Commissions for opinion, comment and possible additions. The list had been prepared on the basis of the Constitution, the Charter of National Commissions and various resolutions of the General Conference that addressed the advisory role of the National Commissions. That would highlight the added value and the crucial role of National Commissions and would provide a general overview of the increasing workload and the wide variety of actions that were required.

The Kenya National Commission addressed the meeting and thanked all those who had come to Diani for the Fifth Interregional Meeting of National Commissions. Since the meeting in Diani, all units of the Kenya National Commission had continued their activities and were ready to take into account the recommendations of the meeting. There would be a prioritization and a number of recommendations would be included in its new strategic plan. One of the recommendations which was considered a priority was to encourage African National Commissions to promote the General History of Africa, especially in education. The process had already been launched. For the moment, eight volumes had been published. In 1964, at the 13th session of the General Conference, when the initiative had been launched, UNESCO had been instructed to initiate the drafting of the General History of Africa. The project had required significant funding. Phase 1 had been completed in 1999 and phase 2 had started in 2009. UNESCO had developed educational materials for primary and secondary schools on the basis of the eight GHA volumes and had undertaken to promote harmonization of teaching of the series in higher education across Africa. The ministers of education of the African Union had agreed in October 2010 that the teaching materials should be adopted in schools in Africa. It was important for Member States to make use of the results of the project. African States had risen to the challenge and had entered into a partnership with the UNESCO regional office to develop a matrix for the integration of the GHA in primary schools. The intention now was to develop it for teenagers. The speaker thanked UNESCO for supporting the project and called upon African National Commissions to promote it so as to ensure its perennity. In that connection, it would be useful if, in Africa, the training of National Commission staff, which would be funded by the unspent funds of $305,000, included the GHA. Kenya planned to organize Kenya Week, to be held from 12 to 16 November at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

The Korean National Commission took the floor, noting that the regional meeting which had taken place in Gyeongju (Republic of Korea) as follow-up to the Diani meeting had brought together over 100 representatives from 30 National Commissions. The meeting had covered issues specific to the Asia and Pacific region. The UNESCO Secretariat, four regional offices, and five category 2 centres had also been in attendance. There had been a presentation on UNESCO’s changing environment, and participants had studied ways of strengthening cooperation between National Commissions, UNESCO regional offices, and category 2 centres. Discussions had been held on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and on Strategic Transformation. The Canadian Commission for UNESCO had been invited to talk about the visibility of the National Commissions. The meeting had adopted the Gyeongju Recommendations. It bore emphasizing that the National Commissions were UNESCO’s allies, particularly in the context of the implementation of the SDGs.
National Commissions played an essential role in mobilizing their respective countries’ national authorities, experts and beneficiaries.

It was mentioned that several key recommendations had been issued as a result of the meeting, notably that regional and subregional meetings should be held regularly to strengthen cooperation among National Commissions; efforts should be made to ensure that the Asia and the Pacific region be better represented at UNESCO, including on the Executive Board, and that Member States should provide National Commissions with the necessary financial and human resources. A proposal had also been made to update the Secretariat’s guidelines for the functioning of the National Commissions and to create additional channels for contributions to UNESCO’s reform process. No information documents on the National Commissions had been published since 2009, when the Secretariat had issued Architecture of National Commissions for UNESCO. Without proper knowledge of the overall situation, it was not possible to achieve sound progress. An online survey would be a relatively simple way of gathering information on the situation.

The Korean National Commission suggested that it would be advisable for the National Commissions to take into account the Gyeongju Recommendations. Individual National Commissions did not carry much power, but by joining forces, they could make headway.

The Slovenian National Commission took the floor, discussing a project to establish “a facilitation group for National Commissions”, which Slovenia had presented at the Diani meeting. Following a lively debate, some National Commissions expressed doubts with regard to the establishment of such a group. The speaker said that the idea was to set up a platform through which to support the network of National Commissions, given that in the European Union a similar online platform had already been in operation for four years. The European platform was a valuable forum for sharing ideas and fostering cooperation between meetings. The Slovenian National Commission had thus welcomed the presentation given by ADG/ERI a.i. on the topic of an interactive platform for all the National Commissions, which would be an excellent means of strengthening cooperation. It was difficult to plan meetings to ensure opportunities for continual contact. The National Commissions could actively participate in the establishment of the proposed platform. Finally, the speaker announced that an informal meeting of the European National Commissions would be held in February 2019.

The representative of the Permanent Delegation of Uruguay took the floor to inform the participants of the regional meeting of the National Commissions of Latin America and the Caribbean, which was to be held on 22 and 23 November 2018 in Montevideo, Uruguay. She pointed out the importance of such a space for dialogue among the National Commissions on a regional level. The previous meeting of the National Commissions of the sub-region had taken place in 2012. The initiative taken by Uruguay reflected its commitment to the Organization; its objective was to encourage regional dialogue and strengthen the role of the National Commissions. The Government of Uruguay had sought to include the Montevideo meeting as part of the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The meeting would provide an opportunity to reflect on the region’s achievements and future challenges with regard to UNESCO’s fields of competence. It would be a chance to discuss the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the strategic transformation process, and follow-up to the recommendations of the Diani meeting. She noted the mobilization of all the regional offices, the UNESCO Chairs in human rights, and the category 2 centre in Buenos Aires; she also indicated that the attendance of 26 States had been confirmed to date.

The National Commissions of Switzerland and the United Kingdom presented the results of the pilot project titled “Assessing the Value of UNESCO within a Framework of International Cooperation (VINCI)”. The speakers said that the project was similar to an undertaking of the United Kingdom National Commission to measure UNESCO’s added value, particularly in economic and policy-related terms. It involved a joint study conducted by various National Commissions; it was based on the work of the United Kingdom and extended its analysis to the values underlying UNESCO’s mandate. It was a cooperative endeavour among seven National Commissions, namely, those of Germany, Iceland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, United Kingdom, Slovenia and Switzerland. The first
step entailed a study focused on the 2030 Agenda and on a type of unit from the UNESCO network and the UNESCO Chairs.

The study had been conducted with support from two universities and had involved the participation of all the aforementioned States, which had mobilized their Chairs and had shared data previously gathered. A number of meetings between the participants had taken place over the course of the preceding two or three years. A report had subsequently been produced; it discussed the results in terms of Chairs’ contributions to the 2030 Agenda and in terms of recommendations for highlighting UNESCO’s added value. An additional objective was to lay the foundations for a methodology which could be replicated throughout the entire UNESCO network in future.

The report provided a basis for better understanding the value and significance of the UNESCO Chairs in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. The report recommended expanding and strengthening the UNESCO Chair and UNESCO/UNITWIN (University Twinning and Networking Programme) guidelines in order to demonstrate their impact on the SDGs, and identify links with academic studies, and establishing a recognition programme to publicize relevant research. The National Commissions added value to the national Chairs because they could provide data on the SDGs.

During the meeting, priority activities undertaken in three Programme Sectors were also presented by their Assistant Director-Generals.

Ms Stephania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education (ADG/ED), mentioned that UNESCO had an important mission as it was focal point for the 2030 Agenda and responsible for its implementation, with particular emphasis on Sustainable Development Goal 4, which was linked explicitly to other SDGs, such as gender equality. UNESCO could help to ensure that the SDGs were attained in order to shape a better world. UNESCO was the focal point and faced what was both a challenge and an opportunity. There were several tasks before it to reach that aim: the Member States must be supported in the implementation of SDG 4; today, no one should be left behind. That included education for girls. Everyone must be included in the process. Coordination and monitoring at the global and regional levels was also part of UNESCO’s work. There were clear results which were expected from the implementation of the strategy. Education was a human right. The Organization was trying to assist Member States to develop better policies and plans that were specially adapted to their education systems. It had a strategy for technical and vocational education and training (TVET), which many countries needed. The aim was to ensure that countries had their own TVET strategy. Young people should have the opportunity to choose and to have access to practical learning for better employment opportunities. Teacher training was important because teachers were at the heart of UNESCO’s agenda, at the heart of its work. Education for girls and women was paramount. There was a need to prioritize, which was not to say that one subject was more important than another, but that it was important to adapt to contexts. It was also important that UNESCO take charge of some key initiatives and areas of action such as gender equality with women’s and girls’ education, education of refugees and displaced populations, research, foresight and anticipation. More than two thirds of the funding targets had been mobilized.

National Commissions were a vital asset for the Organization and cooperation was essential to improve implementation of the goals. Strategic partnerships and resource mobilization were very important. It was necessary to call on regional development organizations and banks. Middle-income countries must be encouraged to further engage in UNESCO’s activities. Decentralization could be both a strength and a weakness; the programme of the Education Sector was decentralized, with regional offices, field offices and category 1 centres. The network must be enhanced.

Mr Ernesto Ottone-Ramirez, Assistant Director-General for Culture (ADG/CLT), stated that he recognized the importance that the National Commissions attached to the culture programme. Expectations were high for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, responding to attacks on heritage, cultural institutions and the rights of artists, and intervention in the event of natural disasters. The strategic transformation must help through three pillars: strengthening the normative and operational leadership of UNESCO through conventions, *inter alia*; support to public cultural
policies, and national legislation. The Culture Sector was known for its work in support of heritage, including the tangible heritage; that was an area where its expertise was in high demand. However, emphasis should be placed as well on living heritage. Creative industries created wealth, representing between 3% and 4% of global GDP, and were the largest employers of 18-29 year olds. Investment must be made at the local level. ADG/CLT proposed a strategy based on the Creative Cities Network; the National Commissions, thanks to their community roots, could support the efforts of member cities of the Network, which would continue to grow over time. The teaching of the arts and culture was also important. In the area of intersectoral cooperation, CLT was working with ED, as well as with the Communication and Information Sector (CI), regarding freedom of expression, and with the Natural Sciences Sector (SC) on biodiversity. The 2030 Agenda was at the heart of UNESCO’s mandate; indicators were required to measure the impact of culture on sustainable development.

UNESCO must return to the heart of contemporary cultural debates, it must again become a space for exchange and innovation and fulfill its role as mediator. The meeting on Mosul showed UNESCO’s strength in bringing together experts and policy-makers.

A forum of ministers of culture should be held in the autumn of 2019 during the General Conference session. Those proposals were in line with UNESCO’s strategic transformation, which aimed to strengthen UNESCO’s role as a laboratory of ideas.

There was a need to strengthen strategic partnerships by diversifying partners and encouraging new players to support the Organization’s efforts in the world. National Commissions could play an important role in linking UNESCO with those partners in their countries and identifying new support mechanisms.

Mr Moez Chakchouk, Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information (ADG/CI), said that the CI Sector was important as it contributed to a number of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with regard to technology and the Internet, for example. It was important for the three cross-cutting priorities to be at the heart of the Organization’s objectives: Africa, gender equality and youth. The Sector had two main lines of action: fostering freedom of expression online and offline, and promoting the safety of journalists. It was necessary to ensure the independence of the media. With regard to intersectoral cooperation, CI was working with ED on preventing violent extremism, with SC on natural disaster risk reduction, with SHS on Networks of Mediterranean Youth (Net-Med Youth) and with CLT on freedom of expression.

Upon the invitation of the Chairperson, several participants took the floor.

One participant asked the ADG/ED for information on the education of migrants following the natural disaster that had taken place in Indonesia. He asked also the ADG/CLT whether he had any academic studies on freedom of expression and what indicators were used for its measurement. He also expressed his agreement as to the need for ministers of culture to meet at the time of the 2019 General Conference session. Lastly, he asked the ADG/CI on how the National Commissions could work with journalists, ensuring their safety. Some governments, including his own, had obtained a score of 85 in the area of safety of media professionals.

One participant asked how to obtain financial support, aside from technical support. His National Commission had recently noted less cooperation and communication between the Commission and the field office. That was a challenge for UNESCO in relation to UNICEF and the World Bank.

One speaker seconded the question asked by the preceding speaker. He also asked how the National Commissions were to implement the proposals, given that it was a matter of sectoral reform. It seemed that certain elements were missing, especially in the Culture Sector; there was no reference to document 39 C/5, to the main lines of action, or to governance.

One participant said that his National Commission sought to support UNESCO’s strategies and proposed organizing a training session for the National Commissions in his country in order to follow up on the Diani recommendation.
Another participant endorsed the first speaker and recalled that a natural disaster had hit Haiti and that UNESCO had adopted a resolution in support of Haitian citizens.

One participant shared his ongoing focus on value added and on awareness of priorities. The previous year (2017), his country had undertaken a major project to revitalize the Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education in order to reinforce the UNESCO network. The ninth volume of the General History of Africa should soon be launched.

One participant pointed out that it would be helpful to obtain details on the partnerships established in each sector.

Replies:

ADG/ED said that it was necessary to cooperate actively with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Education Cannot Wait, and other such entities. Her Sector would develop an emergency strategy. The Organization had to reaffirm its intellectual leadership in the context of the 2030 Agenda and establish an action plan which provided concrete responses in countries(103,235),(972,298).

ADG/CLT recalled that Africa and gender equality were two of UNESCO’s priorities. Projects were determined in collaboration with category 2 centres and field offices. Nothing new was being proposed; work was being done to connect document 39 C/5 and the 2030 Agenda. UNESCO was working on the ground with national authorities because certain policies were State policies.

ADG/CI said that it was not up to the Organization to state which country was free and which was not. The Sector was conducting an assessment. It was necessary to work together to ensure journalists’ safety and to train judges on the subject of ending impunity. He said that everything, even artificial intelligence, was included in the C/5 document.

ADG/ED said that, from the perspective of Strategic Transformation Working Group 3, the first question raised was that of the type of partnership involved. Currently, there were several ways of looking at the concept. The group had until the end of the year to submit data and make proposals for the following Executive Board session.

Before the Chairperson declared the meeting closed, the Secretariat thanked the National Commissions, the Chairperson of the meeting, and the Assistant Directors-General in attendance for their active participation and fruitful discussion.