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SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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on the occasion of the first meeting of the UN Inter-Agency Committee (IAC) on the  
United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)

UNESCO, 12 June 2006

Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the first meeting of the United Nations Inter-Agency Committee (IAC) on the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). UNESCO has convened and organized this meeting in its capacity as the lead agency for the Decade. I would like to thank you all for attending this inaugural meeting, which represents an important opportunity to exchange ideas and information and to build synergy among the UN agencies in this field.

This need for greater coherence and cooperation, of course, applies more broadly within the UN system on a range of key issues. UNESCO is fully involved in the process of the High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence established by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for this purpose. Naturally, we are making efforts to increase coherence and collaboration without waiting for the report of the High-Level Panel. In this regard, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is an excellent theme for the whole of the UN system. I am therefore very pleased that you are participating with us on this occasion.

An inaugural meeting of this kind needs to be placed in context. Without going into detail here, I would like to stress the continuity of the thread going back to the Brundtland Commission and the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – the so-called “Earth Summit”. The Summit’s Agenda 21 accorded high importance to the role of education in promoting development that is respectful and supportive of the natural environment. Subsequently, the concept of “sustainable development” received further elaboration. By the time of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the three main inter-linked dimensions of sustainable development had been clearly articulated, namely, economic development, social development and environmental protection.

The idea of a UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development grew out of this process. At the Johannesburg Summit, the world’s leaders confirmed the importance of ESD as part of the wider drive towards sustainable development. They agreed that the UN General Assembly should be asked to adopt the proposed Decade, for the period 2005-2014. This recommendation was taken up three months later, in December 2002, when the draft resolution calling for the Decade was introduced by Japan, with support from many co-sponsors. This draft resolution was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in its fifty-seventh session. The Decade duly commenced on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005.

Two months later, on 1st March 2005, accompanied by Mrs Nane Annan and other leading figures, I launched the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development internationally at UN Headquarters in New York. Since then, many

significant events and activities have taken place. These include a series of regional and national launches of the Decade in all parts of the world. In addition, the Europe-North America and Asia-Pacific Regions have prepared their regional ESD strategic frameworks, and other regions have embarked upon this process. I am pleased with these developments, as they provide high visibility to the Decade and contribute to advancing the ESD agenda by mobilizing support, generating momentum and building commitment and partnership.

Above all, I am very heartened by the active interest in the Decade and its goals shown by Member States, UN partners, other international organizations, UNESCO National Commissions, civil society organizations, universities and research institutes, experts and professional associations, as well as by individuals, young and old, in the North and in the South, and in all walks of life. Whatever else it may be, the Decade is serving as a vehicle of enthusiasm and commitment which is truly inspiring.

Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the designated lead agency for the Decade, UNESCO was called upon by the UN General Assembly resolution establishing the Decade to develop a draft International Implementation Scheme, in consultation with United Nations agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders. We set about this task in earnest, though it proved to be a complex process. The draft document certainly benefited enormously from the diverse contributions we received, including from the Inter-Agency Meeting on DESD organized by UNESCO on 5 September 2003 in Paris. Later, the draft International Implementation Scheme was presented at the 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly in September-October 2004; it was also shared with all our partners as well as made available online on the DESD website for final feedback. The comments that we subsequently received were incorporated into the document and, after further refinements were undertaken, the final International Implementation Scheme was approved by the 172<sup>nd</sup> Session of UNESCO's Executive Board in September 2005. Broad and flexible, the Scheme provides the framework within which all actors and stakeholders committed to the Decade's goals can find a place.

Let me now say a few words about UNESCO's role in the Decade. Included within its responsibility as lead agency for promoting the Decade is the task of international coordination; the effective functioning of this Inter-Agency Committee, which will meet annually, is an integral part of this.

UNESCO was also required by the UN General Assembly resolution setting up the Decade to provide recommendations for governments on how to promote the integration of ESD into their respective educational strategies and action plans at the

appropriate level. Thus, UNESCO is making substantive, practical contributions to ESD in such areas as policy advice, capacity-building, teacher training, curriculum development and renewal, and the generation of educational and training materials. We are concerned with both formal and nonformal modalities of learning about sustainable development, as well as with promoting broader public awareness.

Let me highlight some specific features of UNESCO's approach to its role in the Decade.

First, we are determined to ensure that DESD is integrally linked with other major educational initiatives and frameworks. To this end, along with the preparation of the International Implementation Scheme which itself highlights these connections, we generated a document identifying linkages between the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA), the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The document provides an overview of the similarities and differences among these processes and includes suggestions for mutual support and collaboration.

Second, I would like to put emphasis on the importance UNESCO attaches to intersectorality. As the agency with mandates for Education, the Natural Sciences, the Social and Human Sciences, Culture, and Communication and Information, UNESCO's contribution draws together the substantive knowledge, professional expertise and innovative modalities available from these fields. ESD, in fact, lends itself to being a key vector of intersectorality but this, we recognize, needs to be actively fostered and encouraged. I have therefore set up an internal Intersectoral Working Group on ESD, chaired by the Assistant Director-General for Education, Mr Peter Smith, to provide overall coordination and facilitate the programmatic contributions of all relevant disciplines within UNESCO to ESD and the Decade.

Third, and closely linked to the previous point, UNESCO as a whole is engaged in the Decade – from Headquarters to Field Offices and institutes; from the Education Sector to all the other Sectors; from the Secretariat to other parts of the UNESCO family such as its National Commissions, UNESCO clubs and the schools linked through the Associated Schools Project network.

Fourth, UNESCO's approach to the Decade places a premium on partnership, not only among the UN agencies represented here today but also among the vast array of stakeholders in civil society, the private sector, academia and the professions as well as governments and regional bodies. Our intention is to make the Decade a catalyst of joint action and collaboration.

Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Education for sustainable development is not and must not be an abstract, narrowly academic matter. It must be a concrete reality for all of us – individuals, organizations, governments – in all of our daily decisions and actions, so as to promise a sustainable planet and a safer world to our children, our grandchildren and their descendants. The principles of sustainable development must find their place in early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, higher education, nonformal education and community-based learning activities. Our aim must be to ensure that ESD pursues a global vision of a world where every one has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and positive social change.

The challenge before us is to recognize how each agency will make its own contribution to the goals and objectives of the DESD, and support one another in doing so. I strongly believe that the DESD provides the opportunity for all of us to work together as “one United Nations” for the benefit of our stakeholders and Member States.

In my address at the international launch of the Decade in New York just over one year ago, I spoke of how, in learning how to live sustainably, we must learn “the lessons of interdependence”. I pointed to three such lessons: first, recognizing our interdependence within society and between different societies; second, understanding that our interdependence extends to the relation between human society and the natural environment; and, third, appreciating the crucial interdependence between the present and the future. I could have added a fourth lesson, namely, the interdependence between all the actors and stakeholders involved in an enterprise such as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Let us work together and, by so doing, achieve so much more than our individual and separate efforts could ever attain.

Thank you once again for your participation in this very important first meeting of the Inter-Agency Committee on DESD. I look forward to the outcomes this meeting, which I am confident will put in place effective inter-agency collaboration and cooperation mechanisms with renewed commitment for the successful implementation of DESD. My hope, in fact, is that the Decade will become an exemplary case for showing how greater UN coherence and synergy can be achieved.

Thank you.