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At the Opening of the Conference on Illiteracy Challenges in the Arab  
Region

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**In the name of God**

**The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful**

**H.E. The Director General of UNESCO,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It pleases me to open with you this conference which as we know deals with a topic of utmost sensitivity and complexity.

Our topic is sensitive not only because illiteracy represents that paralysis affecting the central nervous system of the society incapacitating its ability to carry out its vital functions, but because through this we can demonstrate the worthiness of our belonging to this millennium.

Is it possible for any one of us to imagine a comprehensive social development without taking into consideration - while engineering the policies and strategies leading to that goal - the issue of knowledge

values, improvement of human capacities and the legitimate right of access to knowledge and information.

This is the sensitivity of the topic, whereas its complexity is that all of us on all levels whether in the Arab world or outside it, realize the importance and necessity of combating illiteracy.

But when this title is put forward, often the reaction comes mostly in the form of presenting what has been fulfilled of strategies plans and programs to contain this plague as a means to learning reading and writing.

Is this the function of literacy? Or as I imagine this function must be an approach to improve human efficiency and building capacities.

Then we have to set accurately our definition of illiteracy because specifying the concept and agreeing on its elements will help us in building the methodology of addressing it. Literacy in this sense is a system that enables the individual to understand well his surroundings and provides him with the proper and necessary tools to make a positive

impact on his environment and surroundings whether immediate or distant.

This controversial interaction makes literacy an approach to human development which is a means to reach knowledge and build societies. In this sense it also enables the individual employ his experience to serve himself, his family, his community and the world.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are in front of a complex pattern with which we confront several forms of illiteracies, namely illiteracy of reading and writing, illiteracy of technology, illiteracy of environment awareness, illiteracy of culture, illiteracy of media, health illiteracy and so on.

When approaching these forms shall we adopt a splitting methodology which considers each case separately or that literacy community requires that we deal with these components within the context of a comprehensive vision.

I think the second option is the most appropriate especially as it conforms with the philosophy of education for ever. Hence we are facing a big challenge which we cannot confront just with our own convictions as it requires a great deal of societal innovation and imagination on our part in order to find the suitable environment which provides an opportunity for knowledge community to flourish.

Therefore it is necessary to institutionalize literacy to make it a societal choice based on a political will that respects the role of the citizen in the first place and recognizes the status and role of the community in this connection by building wide partnerships with the civil society organizations, without which it will be impossible to achieve the desired goals.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In this conference which is devoted to illiteracy elimination challenges in the Arab world, we are invited to exchange expertise and experiences and make use of everything to build an advanced approach within the

context of a deep vision that takes in account the particularities of our region on all levels without ignoring that we belong to a rapidly changing world.

Now we should not miss the opportunities and realize that to build and promote a knowledge community and not just the information community requires in the first place a political will that lays the foundation for deep reforms which make education a driving force of the community.

When such political will exists it will make literacy a strategic element of sustainable human development. As we noticed eliminating illiteracy is a system of significance to citizen development, therefore it should not be circumstantial, elitist or sectorial nor should it take into consideration the gender or social differences. Our success in eliminating illiteracy according to this perspective will be the basis towards modernity and democracy and also the way to peace and stability.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

If this is our deep-rooted conviction, then it is our duty to observe all the components of our educational system and strive to develop them as they are our strong support to play an effective role in this millennium.

Hence it is our highest priority to protect this system in all circumstances and particularly during the time of war and crises. It is the difficulty which could be solved once we reschedule our priorities and draw a policy that takes into consideration not only the short term security interests but is also based on a political insight that looks to the future and plans for it as a reserve stock for human survival and stability.

Perhaps the case of education in Iraq is a living example of what could result from confused agendas and different priorities.

So how could we explain the existence of will and capacity to surpass the pressures of the security situation when it concerns the protection of natural resources flow; while this capacity becomes null when the aim is

to protect the intellect sources of educational institutions and universities then we stand as spectators and attribute this to the difficulty of the situation.

Since in all forums we never stop talking about sustainable development whose end and means is man, it is better for us to get more in harmony with the logic of the age and show all keenness on nurturing brains before oil fields.

I think all of us in this universe both Arabs and others are fully concerned with solidarity with students, graduates, educationalists in Iraq, since all are a strategic depth of the Arab and human intellect.

I believe it is our duty and the duty of UNESCO which guards the world educational conscience to strive to find mechanisms to activate this solidarity.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Indeed the elimination of illiteracy is no less important than combating the warming of the globe and the containment of the immunodeficiency virus.

Under all circumstances we have to deal with these dangerous phenomena with much innovation and imagination, and moreover need to formulate an integrated vision to realize the desired sustainable development by surpassing these phenomena.

Therefore we have to think of the period that follows these regional conferences and how we can employ the results reached to make illiteracy elimination a strategic tributary of sustainable development. Only then we could put our hands on the keys to containment of illiteracy in its wide sense.

Thank you for your attentive listening.