

Speech by Mr. Herman van Hooff, Director of the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Opening Ceremony of the XVII Forum of Ministers of Culture and Officials in Charge of Cultural Policies of Latin America and the Caribbean, Quito, Ecuador, 12 and 13 April 2010

Your Excellency María Fernanda Espinosa, Minister Coordinator for Cultural and Natural Heritage and delegate representing the President of the Republic.

Your Excellency Mr. Ramiro Noriega Fernández, Minister of Culture of the republic of Ecuador and President of the XVII Forum of Ministers of Culture and Officials in Charge of Cultural Policies of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Your Excellencies Ministers, Deputy Ministers and Heads of Delegations, of Latin American and Caribbean Member States.

Ecuadorian Authorities,
Distinguished Guests and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and Friends,

It is for me a great pleasure to be here with you in this occasion and convey to you the warm message of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and of its Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean.

I would like to thank the authorities of the Republic of Ecuador, especially the Minister of Culture, for the invitation to the Forum, in which I am participating together with Mr. Fermín Matoko, Director of the UNESCO Office in Quito, and Mrs. Olga Rufins, Technical Secretary of the Forum.

The Forum is being held within the framework of 2010, “International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures”, and features a joint meeting UNESCO-Forum on “Cultural Policies for Diversity and Development”, as a follow-up to the resolution adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in October 2009.

This meeting of the Forum is being held just a few months after Mrs. Irina Bokova was elected as the new UNESCO Director-General, the first time in the history of the Organization a woman holds its highest position. In her inaugural address, the Director-General stated that her election continues to be a message of trust for all the women in the world. I am therefore much pleased in conveying special greetings to my women colleagues from Latin America and the Caribbean who are working in the field of culture in the most varied positions and with diverse responsibilities who are also represented here today in this important meeting.

As you would surely remember, the XVII Forum of Ministers of Culture and Officials in Charge of Cultural Policies of Latin America and the Caribbean was established within the framework of the First Meeting of Ministers of Culture of

the region, held in Brazil in 1989 in which *Culture as an instrument for regional integration and development* was one of the major topics discussed.

After 16 meetings, the issue is still as valid as the first day, and the Forum has reaffirmed its condition as the space par excellence for reflection of the highest cultural governmental as it is the oldest such space, but also because of its members, it is the only scenario in which all Member States of Latin America and the Caribbean meet.

The Forum of Ministers of Culture is the major partner in the strategy of the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean for regional cooperation. The Office contributes with the Technical Secretariat of the Forum since 1999 and since 2002, coordinates and funds the oldest of its projects, the "Portal of Culture of Latin America and the Caribbean", which is currently published in three of the four working languages of the Forum.

The Forum faces an enormous responsibility in a rich and diverse region, in a world that should learn to harmonize globalization with the respect towards the diversity of cultures and their promotion, where the true wealth of humanity lies and what guarantees its future, because, as the Director-General said, and I quote "...it is a powerful vector of communication between peoples that makes dialogue possible when there is no other solution, and the pillar, on which the preservation of our heritage rests, whether it be tangible and intangible heritage, languages, the preservation of nature and development".¹ End of quote.

Precisely in keeping with this vision is the central topic selected for this meeting of the Forum: **Cultural Integration of Latin American and the Caribbean in defence of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue for a sustainable development**, which is also in agreement with one of the priorities towards which UNESCO will focus its major efforts in the current biennium: **Promoting the diversity of cultural expressions and dialogue among cultures to promote a culture of peace.**

Together with the actions to be undertaken in this regard, UNESCO is based on a solid normative basis approved by the Organization's Member States, which, in turn, counts among its instruments, on seven international conventions related to culture, such as the 2005 Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions; the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; and the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972).

With regards to such an important issue, there is a lot the Forum can do to promote the adherence to such instruments of those Member States who haven't done it so far.

It is now our turn to work jointly and coordinately in the implementation of these conventions both at the regional and national levels, through efficient policies

¹ Address by Ms. Irina Bokova upon her installation as Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 18th Plenary Meeting, Paris, 23 October 2009.

and actions, through legislations empowered with the necessary mechanisms and through a vision of development which integrates culture in all its dimension –or at least in a part of it-.

One of the subtopics of the Forum, **Cultural Diversity and Development**, precisely calls for the much needed debate on the close links between culture and development, the central topic of discussion of the Meeting of Youth for Latin American and Caribbean Integration "Participation, Culture and Development" held previous to this Forum, under the topic "Participation, Culture and Development".

The Forum will furthermore focus on another extremely important issue for the region: **Mobilizing culture in the face of natural challenges.**

Deeply moved we have witnessed the devastating effects of recent earthquakes on the Republics of Haiti and Chile.

These violent earthquakes, together with the sorrow and death, have left millions of people homeless and have open deep wounds in the culture of both nations.

Especially in Haiti, the earthquake that hit the country on 12 January has produced enormous damage to the cultural heritage of the country. Therefore, from the very first moment, UNESCO expressed its solidarity and support to that nation, which has translated into constant information, request for humanitarian aid to the international community and the development of a group actions including visits by several delegations to the country, among them one headed by the Director-General. Another action was the proposal to create an International Coordination Committee which would coordinate actions in the area of culture and the organization of the Forum "Rebuilding the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of Haiti, held on 24 March at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

In this sense, it is satisfactory to note that the text prepared by the Government of Haiti on the rebuilding of the country, the foundation for the negotiations during the Donors' Conference in New York, presents culture is a key element for the social and economic development of the nation. Therefore, a government-issued document explicitly affirms that culture should be a key element in development policies.

In the case of Chile, apart from expressing sorrow for the destruction and deaths as a consequence of the powerful earthquake occurred on 27 February, UNESCO also declared its willingness to contribute with its knowledge and expertise and to provide support in the reconstruction efforts.

The Organization has emphasized the need for the countries located in high risk areas to strengthen their capabilities for adopting preventive measures and to increase their vigilance and preparedness to face natural disasters. In this regard, the protection of heritage and the mobilization of culture to face the

challenges imposed by nature is a very timely and necessary topic to be dealt with in the region now.

Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

Intense working days are waiting for us, and I am sure, they will be very fruitful. I wish the greatest success to this Forum being inaugurated today, in a time of crisis and natural disasters, but also in a time when culture can, and should, play a fundamental role, where solidarity, respect to diversity and dialogue among cultures will lead humanity towards development and peace.

Thank you.