

Madam President of the General Conference,  
Mr. Chairperson of the Executive Board,  
Director-General,  
Distinguished colleagues,

It is my great honour to take floor for the first time in this prestigious UNESCO's body.

Serbia welcomes the continued focus on the reforms and strategic transformation of UNESCO that is now in its crucial operational stage and commends all the efforts of the Secretariat under skillful and tireless leadership of the Director General. These transformational endeavors have to be innovative, while at the same time building upon the results already achieved in various fields of UNESCO's work and fully respecting its intergovernmental character. Important work is in front of us in the next phase under pillar 3 dealing with the comprehensive programme review that should be carried out in an inclusive and sustainable way.

We strongly believe that we need UNESCO that is well equipped and ready to deal with the challenges of today's world, which is undergoing profound changes. Further improvement of the Organization's Programme delivery and strengthening its comparative advantages, in order to keep it relevant and impactful, should be a shared ambition and, accordingly, a shared responsibility of all of us. In this context, continuous investments in advancing the management of the Organization and its operational efficiency and transparency, are of key importance. UNESCO is on the right track and as a global leader in knowledge and practice, is central to the implementation of the SDGs.

The need for enhancement of the multi-stakeholder partnership with the UN family, as well as for the alignment of strategic transformation of UNESCO with the ongoing reforms of the United Nations, especially within the UN Development System, is also evident. Strategic positioning of UNESCO within wider UN system will have crucial impact on the success of its transformation, as well as on its contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Strategizing and programming that start from Member States' needs and priorities, as well as balanced and efficient resource allocation, concentrated on UNESCO's central tasks, should be reflected appropriately in the Programme and Budget of the Organization. Strong focus on the 2030 Agenda and on promoting UNESCO's leadership roles for specific SDGs, as well as on two global priorities - Africa and gender equality, is of key importance. Programmatic framework that allows UNESCO to keep its relevance is not achievable without adequate resources but at the same time, additional efforts are needed to ensure cost-effectiveness of activities, enhanced professional competencies for Programme delivery and strengthened management and accountability culture.

Results-based programmatic orientation focused on the real and tangible impact on the ground and strong focus on issues at the heart of UNESCO's mandate can be a driving force of revitalization of UNESCO and its role in today's world. In this context, the importance of UNESCO's leadership in ensuring that more and more people all around the world receive quality education and skills necessary in the modern era cannot be overemphasized.

Serbia continues to support UNESCO's vision to transform lives through education. Education is the priority and basis for the development of Serbia as well. Our goal is to create a society based on knowledge in which people, their ideas and innovations are the drivers of progress. Quality education, corresponding to the needs of modern world and available to everyone, is an objective pursued by my country.

We strongly believe that UNESCO has to be at the heart of the global education architecture and agenda. UNESCO's activities in this field and, especially, in the implementation of the SDG 4, have contributed to ensuring not only that education remains high on the global development agenda but also to enhancing UNESCO's visibility at the global level, offering it an opportunity to capitalize on its comparative advantages.

Avoiding polarizing issues that do not belong here, thus keeping the Organization away from the damaging politicization, incompatible with its original mandate, is a necessary precondition for renewed credibility of UNESCO. We should be building upon those issues that unite us rather than on those that divide us in order to fulfil the noble goal of the founders of this Organization to pursue the objectives of international peace and common welfare of humanity through development of educational, scientific and cultural cooperation.

Among other issues, protection of cultural heritage is seen by my country as an issue of paramount importance. Cultural heritage should be a wealth that encourages dialogue, tolerance, freedom and mutual respect but in reality, we are faced with the widespread destruction of cultural heritage all over the world that without any selectivity deserves our condemnation, irrespective of the location of these crimes or their perpetrators.

In closing, allow me to reiterate Serbia's strong support to UNESCO, and to its noble endeavors aiming to promote multilateralism in the fields of its competences. We are looking forward to an open and constructive dialogue on issues on our agenda.