

ANNEX V**Address by Mr John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education,
during the award of the Comenius Medal**

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you, on behalf of the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, at this Award Ceremony for the Comenius Medal. The Comenius Medal recognizes educators and researchers, as well as particular initiatives in education, for the excellence and outstanding quality of their work. When UNESCO and the Government of the Czech Republic created this award, we agreed to celebrate all those men and women who, like Comenius, help us build visions for a better future.

Mr President,

This ceremony takes place at the first international gathering of educational policy-makers since the World Education Forum was held in Dakar, Senegal last year. The Dakar Forum followed a series of important international events, going back at least to the Educational for All conference that was held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990.

Through these events the international community has been trying to address with what some have called the greatest moral challenge of our time, namely the fact that hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings cannot exercise their right to receive an education.

Let me briefly remind you of the six goals that were agreed in Dakar.

First, to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. At present, of the 800 million children in the world who are under six years of age, fewer than one-third benefit from any form of early childhood care and education.

Second, to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to – and complete – free and compulsory primary education of good quality. Progress is being made. The net enrolment rate in primary school, which was under 65% in less developed regions in 1970, had risen to 85% by 2000. However this still leaves 113 million children, 60% of whom are girls, out of school.

It is estimated that there are another 100 million children who start school but are taken out and put to work in homes, factories or armies before they have learned to read, write and use number. Sixty per cent of these uneducated children are in countries in conflict or post-conflict situations – adding to the difficulties.

Third, to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programme.

Fourth, to achieve a 50% improvement in the levels of adult illiteracy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults. At present one in four of the adult population of our planet, some 800 million people, have their personal lives and the development of their communities blighted by illiteracy.

Fifth, to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to – and achievement in – basic education of good quality.

Sixth, and finally, to improve all aspects of the quality of education so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

At the World Forum in Dakar the international community charged UNESCO with coordinating the collective effort to progress towards these goals. That is the agenda for Education for All which will be my daily challenge at UNESCO as new Assistant Director-General for Education.

The challenge is so great that we cannot rise to it simply by extending our existing methods and practices. We need innovative approaches to the deployment of media, communications and technologies. We need innovations in the way we train and deploy and respect teachers. We need to develop new and more imaginative ways of cooperating and working together; we need the leadership and commitment of men and women like those we are rewarding today.

Through you, the laureates of the Comenius Medal, I hope that we can achieve greater mobilization and commitment of the academic community and the intellectual community at large, in the collective effort required to meet the challenge of Education for All.

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My admiration of Comenius is based on a rather general knowledge of his work. I am looking forward to hearing Dr Sook Jong Lee, who is a Comenius specialist, speak on behalf of the laureates and help all of us to understand better the importance of this visionary educator. However, I do know that Comenius philosophy and educational thought were sometimes considered too grandiose or too general for the mental outlook of the seventeenth century.

Indeed, his “Via Lucis” – the way of light – is as visionary today as it was when he wrote it. Failing to meet the Education for All challenge would send us back to a “way of darkness”; and that would certainly be incompatible with the mental outlook of the twenty-first century.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before closing, I should like to thank Mr Pieter de Meijer who, in his capacity as President of the Council of the International Bureau of Education, chaired the Jury appointed to evaluate and select candidates for the Comenius Medal. The task and the responsibility involved were very difficult in view of the wealth, diversity and quality of the proposed candidates. However, when Mr de Meijer introduces the candidates to you in a few moments, you will be able to ascertain, as I have, that the Jury has made the right and relevant choices.

I am also very grateful to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic, which not only enabled UNESCO to establish the Medal – as a joint undertaking – but continues to work with us to increase the number of Comenius heirs.

Lastly, I wish to congratulate all the candidates on the exemplary nature of their devotion and competence, to let them know that we are relying on them in the ongoing battle against exclusion, ignorance and poverty entailed in the challenge of Education for All, and to express to them my admiration and pride in awarding them the Comenius Medal.

Thank you for your attention.