

ANNEX VIII**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO
at the opening of the special meeting on the involvement of civil society
in promoting education for all**

Honourable Ministers of Education,
Representatives of civil society,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today for this Special Session of the International Conference on Education (ICE). It is highly appropriate that this Special Session, on the theme of the involvement of civil society in Education for All (EFA), occurs on a day when citizens around the world, governments, politicians, voluntary associations, grassroots workers, teachers, children and many others are celebrating International Literacy Day. In doing so, they are expressing, directly or indirectly, their commitment to the goals shared by everyone in the global EFA movement.

We all have witnessed the lively discussions here at the 46th Session of the ICE. Major issues have been addressed, such as learning to live together in our conflict-ridden world, the complex relationship between globalization and education, and the urgent need to reinforce the ethos and practice of participation at all levels, not least in regard to EFA processes. Allow me to explain, therefore, why this Special Session has been convened.

Since becoming the Director-General of UNESCO in November 1999, I have made the promotion of dialogue with civil society one of my foremost concerns, especially with reference to EFA. At the meeting of the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000, I intervened to ensure the wider participation of civil society in that crucial event. Since then, the encouragement of dialogue with civil society on EFA-related matters has taken place largely at the working level. The significance of this Special Session is two-fold: for the first time, it takes this dialogue to a much higher level, at which civil society representatives interact with a large group of Ministers of Education; in addition, this is the first time that such a Special Session of the ICE has been devoted to the question of civil society.

By bringing together representatives from governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) on a single platform, this Special Session has both symbolic and substantive dimensions. It is symbolic by virtue of being a sign of the increasing recognition of the importance of civil society involvement in education, especially basic education. It is also an indication that partnership and collaboration are being pursued seriously and inclusively. I hope that this meeting will serve to symbolize the spirit of openness, dialogue and respect that must shape the relations between all partners in the EFA movement.

Today's meeting also has substantive content. We shall be sharing real experiences of how civil society supports EFA and how collaboration between governments and civil society is conducted in practice. We shall focus on regions of the world where the EFA challenge is greatest and where, as a result, the international community's priorities must lie in terms of technical and financial assistance. Moreover, our substantive purpose today must be to identify practical steps aimed at enhancing civil society's contribution to EFA and promoting better government/civil society relations.

I would like next to briefly consider what is meant by “civil society” in regard to EFA. The term “civil society” should be understood as inclusive of all groups and associations involved in EFA that are non-governmental and non-profit in nature. For UNESCO, civil society embraces NGOs and campaign networks, teacher unions and religious organisations, community associations and research networks, parents associations and professional bodies, student organizations and women’s groups. I am aware that the definition of civil society is subject to much debate. Should it include political parties? Should it include the private or corporate sector? There is undoubtedly a need for greater clarity regarding who constitutes civil society and why. Different concepts and contextual experiences influence our understanding, and these call for further thought and analysis on our part. UNESCO will be most attentive to the discussion of such matters. However, in the context of EFA and the efforts to strengthen the EFA movement, I underline the importance of being as inclusive as possible.

Clearly, national situations differ enormously. State/civil society relations vary correspondingly. Some countries have no tradition of partnership between the state and civil society, and even the concept of civil society may seem alien and inapplicable. By contrast, some countries have benefited immensely from a widening participation of civil society in governance in general and in social development in particular. To reach this point, of course, a prolonged and painful struggle may have been endured but experience suggests that it ultimately bears fruit.

UNESCO believes that EFA will only be achieved if it is rooted in a broad-based societal movement and nourished by viable government/civil society partnerships. Our reasons are based on both principle and realism. The full achievement of the EFA goals requires that the marginalized and excluded are provided with educational opportunities. Civil society organizations are more capable than other EFA partners of reaching the unreached and, especially in the area of non-formal education, they have devised methods and approaches which are more attuned to the needs and life-conditions of the poor.

Moreover, we must acknowledge that, in the majority of developing countries, the public authorities have been unable to satisfy the demand for free and compulsory primary education of good quality for all children. The 113 million school-age children who are out-of-school, high rates of repetition and dropout, and the 875 million adults who are illiterate are evidence of the fact that the size and complexity of the EFA challenge are too great for governments alone to address, even with the best of intentions and effort.

Consequently, there is a need to both reinforce the state’s responsibilities and complement its role in order to ensure quality basic education for all, especially for those who have been ill-served by or left out of mainstream education. Therefore we need partnership, drawing on the particular strengths of each partner.

In the tradition of modern democratic nation-states, elected governments are recognised as the legitimate authority to take decisions on national education policy choices, including such key areas as curriculum development, teacher education and system reform. Many states have shown great capacity in establishing national public education systems and ensuring, at least in principle, free education for all children and offering training opportunities for youth and adults. Governments manage the national education budget and, in the case of developing countries, mobilise and negotiate foreign aid. The public authorities, moreover, provide the framework of legislation, regulation, inspection and monitoring.

Civil society organizations cannot replace the state in the areas of its core educational responsibilities and authority. What, then, are the types of roles that CSOs play in regard to education in general and EFA in particular? In considering this question, it is increasingly apparent that the role of CSOs cannot be reduced to that of merely complementing the efforts of the state; moreover, such a narrow conception ill-serves the needs of the EFA movement. I shall now outline the four main roles performed by CSOs in regard to EFA.

In the first place, as suggested above, CSOs often act as alternative service providers where state-provided services are either absent or insufficient. CSOs have organized programmes for literacy, skills training and other forms of learning, thereby helping people to improve their livelihoods and living conditions. In many developing countries, CSOs have shouldered major responsibilities for non-formal education programmes entrusted to them by governments and funding agencies. CSOs have the advantage of being more flexible than the state, closer to the grassroots and local cultures and, in many cases, more innovative in approach. CSOs have emerged as leaders and major actors in the provision of non-formal and alternative education, with experience in linking education to other development sectors and building partnerships at different levels.

CSOs may also perform a second role, within and beyond national boundaries, as innovators, as sources of new thinking and new practices, especially concerning the impact of globalization on education. The EFA vision cannot remain fixed and immutable but must respond to changes and generate new initiatives. As well as the resource gap affecting the achievement of EFA, there is also an 'ideas gap' which CSOs can help to fill in collaboration with other EFA partners.

On the basis of the first two roles, CSOs often perform a third role as informed critics and advocates. The last decade witnessed the emergence of new forms of civil society expression and policy dialogue on a whole range of development issues. In regard to education, collective NGO campaigns were organised and national coalitions built to lobby for free and compulsory education of good quality for all children as well as education programmes for out-of-school youth and adults. Such campaigning has helped to raise important issues and to shape today's international EFA agenda.

Informed criticism and advocacy by CSOs also found expression through the EFA 2000 Assessment. In a path-breaking exercise, some 80 NGOs engaged in a collective evaluation of their own programmes and their role in and contribution to EFA. The evaluation demonstrated the relative strengths of NGOs/CSOs in such areas as community participation and organization, empowerment, literacy, community schools, reproductive health, and early childhood education. Particularly important for reaching the unreached are alternative education programmes for youth and adults (particularly women), nomads, the disabled, people living in isolated locations, and populations affected by armed conflict and displacement.

At the World Education Forum in Dakar, more than 300 NGO representatives came to attend the international NGO Consultation, which was jointly organized by the UNESCO/NGO Liaison Committee and the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA, with UNESCO's support. The NGOs drew up a joint communication and made valuable contributions to the drafting of the Dakar Framework for Action. Following a special request from the NGOs, I opened the World Education Forum to all participants who had come to the NGO Consultation, thereby encouraging direct interaction between NGOs, governments and development partners.

It came as no surprise, therefore, that the international community in Dakar agreed to acknowledge and support a new role of civil society in education: as policy partner. Governments, it was agreed, have “an obligation to ensure that EFA goals and targets are reached and sustained” (para. 2 of the Dakar Framework for Action) but it was also recognized that this responsibility “will be met most effectively through broad-based partnerships within countries” (para. 2). The participants in the World Education Forum pledged themselves to “ensure the engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development” (para. 8). This pledge highlights the new consensus in acknowledging the role of CSOs not only as implementing agencies and service providers, as innovators, and as informed critics and advocates, but also as policy partners. The key question, of course, is how we can move from this clear recognition of civil society’s policy role to genuine participation and partnership at the country level.

National policy dialogue may at times be a cumbersome process, but it is essential for moving the EFA agenda forward. UNESCO is strongly committed to the principle that civil society should participate more fully in the policy process and we very much encourage the development of policy partnership between government and civil society. At the same time, however, we know that different local situations will generate different opportunities, modalities and outcomes. The space for civil society participation may be very limited in some countries today. In such cases, scope must be allowed for circumstances to change and new opportunities to arise so that more democratic and open political processes may develop.

There is no single recipe, no ideal model, and no uniform blueprint to guide our actions regarding the involvement of civil society in EFA. In each country context, we must develop a detailed knowledge of the contributions of civil society to the different EFA themes and goals. Such information is not easily available, so much so, in fact, that there may well be an under-reporting of EFA achievement and progress deriving from the activities of CSOs.

Questions must be raised about how to organize a meaningful dialogue with a constituency as large and diverse as civil society. Who has the legitimacy to represent the interest and opinion of civil society organisations in dialogue with the government? Who can speak for whom? How does civil society’s role fit within or alongside established mechanisms of electoral politics and democratic representation? And what is the real capacity at the level of civil society to negotiate policy choices in substantive areas of EFA? These and other questions need to be seriously addressed within a perspective committed to increasing civil society participation in policy dialogue.

UNESCO is convinced that a new culture of policy dialogue for EFA is needed if we are to connect the international political will for civil society participation with national and local realities. In general terms, the new policy culture should be participatory, democratic, open, transparent and accountable. It should transcend hierarchical and institutional barriers and should focus on issues of direct relevance to people’s lives.

I would like now to briefly mention how UNESCO has been actively seeking to foster the participation of CSOs in policy dialogue within the post-Dakar follow-up process, as today’s Special Session bears witness. For example, international civil society networks and NGOs from the different regions were invited to the first meeting last November of the Working Group on EFA. At this meeting, the NGOs drew attention to the importance of decentralisation in national EFA efforts. Joint presentations by government and civil society representatives drew attention to NGO roles in innovative efforts to provide EFA at the community level.

UNESCO also invited NGOs to a consultation on the Global Initiative for mobilizing resources for EFA, held in Paris in March 2001. Both national and international NGOs stressed the need to include civil society in all stages of the planning, formulation and implementation of EFA. The NGOs emphasized how important it is for international agencies to support capacity building that will enable national NGOs and other civil society organizations to play their accorded role in the EFA movement.

In July, UNESCO and the UNESCO/NGO Liaison Committee co-organized the 2001 Annual Meeting of the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA in Bangkok, an event which I consider a milestone in our partnership with civil society. About 100 NGOs from around the world agreed on a new partnership mechanism for EFA that will facilitate and accelerate dialogue, joint reflection, research, and capacity building as well as monitoring and evaluation.

Partnership between governments and civil society at the national level was one of the central themes of the Bangkok meeting. Strategies and activities were proposed that would reinforce the involvement of civil society, including capacity building in policy dialogue and studies of specific country experiences. NGOs also expressed their hope that governments and UNESCO National Commissions would explore various options for creating more space for consultation with civil society. Some NGOs suggested the idea of a protocol to support the dialogue. The meeting also emphasized the need to strengthen civil society coalitions for EFA at the national level; such coalitions will help to build consensus around the priorities and proposals to be brought into the national policy dialogue on education. In addition, international NGOs and NGOs from the different regions agreed to join the co-ordination team which will work with UNESCO to facilitate the implementation of the activities proposed and support the network across the regions.

UNESCO, as the organization mandated to coordinate the EFA partners and maintain their collaborative momentum, has a key role to play in nurturing the new culture of policy dialogue. The Dakar follow-up activities just mentioned illustrate the direction UNESCO wishes to take. We would like to play the role of impartial broker, facilitator and catalyst for promoting and furthering the collaboration between governments and civil society. We believe in the desirability of creating, through dialogue and partnership, an enduring national consensus on the goals, strategies and modalities for achieving EFA.

It is vital that the diversity of voices in the EFA movement is heard and, whenever possible, harmonized. At the same time, UNESCO is keen to encourage intellectual exchange and knowledge creation so that the EFA vision can be continuously refreshed. The 'ideas gap' must be addressed through debate and dialogue so that the EFA agenda moves forward but within a shared vision. UNESCO, therefore, will continue to encourage interaction among all EFA partners through the various consultative mechanisms, working groups and fora that exist. The role of informal contacts as well as formal structures is important. UNESCO will encourage governments and National Commissions to talk with civil society and explore how viable mechanisms for consultation on issues related to EFA can be established or strengthened.

We are optimistic because the seeds for the growth of a new culture of EFA policy dialogue do exist in many countries. As stated earlier, there is no single blueprint suitable for all circumstances but there are ideas, experiences and innovations to learn from. Let us listen and learn together.

Thank you.