

**Message by Ms Clementina Acedo,
Director of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE)
At the opening ceremony of the Preparatory Conference of the African region for
the
48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE)
Yaounde, Cameroon, September 2008**

**The Right Honourable The Prime Minister,
The Minister of Basic Education,
Representatives of Invited Countries,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am particularly touched by the fact that The Prime Minister of the Republic accepted to personally preside at this opening ceremony. Besides being an honour for us, I also see in it a strong political signal of the commitment to education, not only of stakeholders that are directly involved in the educational system, but also of an entire government. It is only through inter-sectoral policies and permanent inter-ministerial dialogue that educational policies adapted to our times can be effectively designed and implemented, and thereby transform our slogan 'education is everybody's concern' into reality. The Right Honourable Prime Minister, your presence here today is also a glowing recognition of the work of UNESCO, and of the International Bureau of Education that I have the honour to head. I want to thank you sincerely for this and also extend my warm wishes and gratitude to the people of Cameroon as a whole for their hospitality.

I would also like to thank all those who worked for the organization of this conference, particularly Mme Haman Adama, Minister of Basic Education and all her staff, Cameroon's representatives at the IBE Council, and of course Cameroon's National Commission for UNESCO, as well as the UNESCO Bureau in Yaounde. I am also grateful to the representatives of all the participating countries. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues of the IBE who worked relentlessly for the proper organization of this conference which I hope will be a resounding success.

As you well know, the conference that opens today is part of a wider preparatory process of the 48th session of the ICE, which started in 2007, and is now ending here in Cameroon. It is with a feeling of pride, relief and satisfaction that I find myself here in Yaounde. A feeling of pride because we are here holding the 14th preparatory meeting, after all those organized in all the regions of the world, and which to date have enabled close to 830 participants to be familiarized with the theme of the ICE, share their concerns and experiences, and also carry out profound reflections on ways of efficiently improving the quality of education for all throughout the world. It is a feeling of relief because this is the last preparatory meeting, and to borrow from athletics, I would say it constitutes for the IBE, the last round of a marathon race that was not only useful and enriching, but also very demanding. The finishing line is in view, and that is the conference itself which is slated for November. It is my conviction that these preparatory meetings will contribute to the total success of the 48th session of the ICE. Finally, I am particularly satisfied

because this conference is being held here in Cameroon, which has a special position in Africa. As a matter of fact, as described in 1973 by the Cameroonian geographer, Jean Felix Loung: "Cameroon is Africa in miniature". Of course, this expression refers first of all to the marvelous geographical diversity of this country, with a varied landscape and climate, from the coastal areas and the tropical forest of the South, to the savannah in the North, through the mountainous plateaus of the West. This expression also illustrates the great diversity of its population, given that Cameroon has not less than 240 ethnic groups and 150 languages. I would like to congratulate the citizens of this country on their capacity to recognize, accept and respect these differences and live together in peace. This is a very beautiful symbol, particularly with regard to the theme of the next ICE.

As you may well know, since 1934 the IBE has been responsible for the organization of the sessions of the International Conference on Education. It is therefore a long-standing tradition and history. However, UNESCO and its member countries continue to give importance to this event, which now constitutes, as one can say, the only regular world forum of Ministers and all education stakeholders. The 48th session of the ICE shall be held in Geneva from 25 to 28 November 2008, and the theme for this year is "Inclusive Education: the way forward".

I would not want to get into the details of the major issues, concepts and implications of such a theme, as that will be the major subject of our deliberations during this meeting, and we shall have occasion for a more in-depth review.

I would simply want to recall that the theme of this 48th ICE session became so obvious that it was adopted at the last UNESCO General Conference. Inclusive inclusion – or education for inclusion – constitutes, both in developed and developing countries, the most difficult challenge facing educational systems, if they have to ensure quality education for all children and youth. As a matter of fact, everywhere individuals and groups are still excluded from education, which at the end of the day is a real denial of human rights.

Who are the excluded? A number of them are cited in the concept paper prepared for this conference: there are those who simply do not have access to education; those left aside due to gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, physical or intellectual capacity, socio-economic status etc.; finally, they are those that the educational system rejects or abandons, for example, due to failure or drop out, multiple repetition of classes, or simply because the system is unable to provide children and youth with knowledge that has a meaning to their lives and that can enable them to integrate in their communities, grow and contribute to its development. Each country has its specificities – with more or less exclusion – but this is not acceptable anywhere in the world. It is therefore urgent to act if we want education for all to be really education for ALL.

However, there is a necessary first step before action: carrying out a profound reflection and broadening our vision of inclusion. This step is primordial, for as the African saying goes, "the feet cannot advance without the head". For a long time, inclusion was understood to mean paying special attention to disabled children and youth with 'specific educational needs', and measures to be taken on their behalf. The history of education has gone a very long way in this direction.

To start with, 'special classes' were first of all created, convinced of the need to 'remove from the system', those students who are different; in the 80s came the policy of integration, with the

endeavour to educate such children in normal classes. At present, even in countries with the most sophisticated integration systems, there is greater awareness of the limitations of these partial solutions. There is therefore, need for a profound review of the vision and objectives of the education system, its legal framework, structures, organization, curriculum content, teaching means and methods, and of course, initial and in-service training for teachers who are key players in quality education for all. There is need for a kind of 'review', so as to extend this vision in order to better orientate action!

For UNESCO, and more widely at the international level, the concept of inclusion should increasingly be considered the **THE PRINCIPLE** that is both aimed at recognizing and accepting the diversity of learners, and considering such differences as wealth and not an impediment. From this perspective, inclusive education is aimed at eliminating exclusion, not only in terms of access, but also against exclusion resulting from societal attitudes and responses to diversity, be they based on race, culture, social class, economic level, gender or physical and/or intellectual abilities.

The various preparatory meetings organized throughout the world have proven that the concept of inclusion is complex, perceived and interpreted differently, with uncertainties, contradictions, doubts or fears, and even sometimes with a feeling of discouragement. For example, we have been asked "Why must we now take into account inclusive education? Why this new concept? Is it another demand by international organizations from countries that are still confronted with the difficulties of attaining Education for All?" The answer is quite simple: inclusion as the founding principle of policies, is at the very centre of the objectives of the Jomtien Conference, the Dakar Forum and the Millennium Development Goals; Furthermore, inclusion is an inalienable human right, provided for by other fundamental international instruments such as the Declaration of the rights of the child or those of disabled persons. This concept is therefore not new; what is new is its explicit affirmation and the call for it to be placed at the centre of country education policies.

During this conference, we shall openly exchange views on the situations, problems and perspectives of each country present. It is my hope that we shall 'speak frankly', without 'mincing words', in order to forge ahead and build together. We are aware that the state of education in Africa is still a major cause for concern: it is the Africans themselves who tell us this. Educational systems are facing serious difficulties relating to access, gender equality, human and financial resources, structures that are often very rigid and still elitist in terms of premises, overcrowded classrooms, ill-adapted curriculum content and means of teaching, teaching methods, inadequate teacher training, etc. quite often, there is the lack of a firm political will, as well as the involvement of parents, communities and the civil society as a whole; sometimes traditions and mentalities are so deep-rooted, reason why it is estimated for example that less than 10% of disabled children in Africa attend school. The situation is even gloomier when one considers the recurrent poverty, urban overpopulation, the dispersion of rural communities and nomadic populations, the ravages of HIV and AIDS, as well as conflict or post-conflict situations.

We are aware that Africa is on the move, and there is mobilization almost everywhere in favour of education and its improvement. We are also aware of promising activities being implemented, that the IBE has been able to observe throughout vast research-action-training projects carried

out since 2003 with 9 Sub-Saharan African countries, some of which are present here in Yaounde.

It is known that policy comprises a permanent tension between the optimism of the will and the pessimism of reality. Even though the present situation is a source of worry, it should equally be a source of hope. I would recall here that in China, the corresponding idea to the concept of ‘‘crisis’’ signifies both ‘‘danger’’ and ‘‘opportunity’’: for African countries that are in crisis - thus in danger – it is possible to take this opportunity, to review, without necessarily questioning efforts already made within the framework of Education for All, one’s conception of education for all, and if necessary, ‘‘shift the paradigm’’. I would allow you to reflect on this statement by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian writer and political theorist who says: ‘‘The pessimism of reality is the prerequisite for the optimism of the will’’.

I am pleased to have to work with you throughout this conference. I have no doubts that our discussions will be interesting and stimulating, and that we shall be enlightened by the experiences, the concerns and hopes of others. I am also convinced that we shall all be armed with renewed courage, such that everywhere in the world – even in the face of an immense task or an ideal that is difficult to achieve – inclusive education should really be ‘‘the way forward’’.

Thank you for your kind attention.