

Address by
Mr. James Alix Michel
President of the Republic of Seychelles
On the occasion of the
35th General Conference of UNESCO
12th October 2009, Paris

Mr. President of the General Conference,
Mr President of the Executive Board,
Mr. Director-General of UNESCO,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I entered the premises of this venerable institution, I could not but be reminded of the words of Nelson Mandela. “*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*”. If we are gathered here today it is because this central tenet of UNESCO’s affords us the opportunity to change the world and, in the process, give humanity a chance. We owe it to this great human family – in all its diversity – to which we all belong. We owe it to our future generations to which we bequeath our legacy.

The task ahead of us is formidable, but not impossible.

Mr. President, we are most pleased and touched that you, a son of a small island developing state, has been given the responsibility of guiding the work of our organisation. I congratulate you. I also congratulate the incoming Director-General on her election and wish her much success in the fulfilment of the responsibilities of the post.

Mr President,

Since the General Conference last met in 2007, the acute financial crisis combined with new and longer-term global threats such as climate change, the food and energy crises have been testing our capacity for cooperation and our creativity as policymakers. Today, at UNESCO, we cannot avoid talking about issues like the financial crisis as the debate on the development agenda pursued by our organisation cannot be dissociated from the ongoing debate about the health and governance of the world economy.

It is important that the international community give increased support to the most vulnerable as the lives of millions of people are in the balance and the gains made in education and other social sectors through great efforts, over many years, are in jeopardy. Promises made must be kept and the financial crisis should not become an excuse for neglecting them.

Mr. President,

Many have said that UNESCO is not an organization where we either give or take. Rather an organisation where we share. What can a small island developing state like Seychelles share with others in UNESCO? We can certainly share good practices in governance and environmental management. We can share our experience in nation-building where peace, unity, tolerance and racial harmony prevail ...Sometimes it is from the experiences of our smallest members that the most valuable and practicable lessons can be learnt.

When we became a sovereign nation it was our goal to create a society where all citizens, of whatever origin or socio-economic status, would enjoy the same rights and equal access to education, health care and other social goods necessary for a life of dignity and human fulfilment. We considered it our historical duty to redress the inequalities inherited from the past.

Education and culture were the keys to the realisation of our vision. UNESCO readily responded to our call and provided the support we sought to establish an education system in tune with our aspirations and to bring about the cultural renewal necessary for the strengthening of national identity and development.

Guided by the principles of “*Education for all, Education for life, Education for self and national development*”, we invested scarce resources and succeeded in achieving universal primary and secondary education, in expanding technical education and training and in significantly raising the literacy rate. We were the first creolophone country to codify Kreol - our mother tongue – and introduce it as a medium of instruction in school while strengthening the teaching and learning of the other two national languages, English and French. We made provision for children with physical and learning challenges who had hereto been excluded.

Last month, we became one of the smallest countries with a university. The University of Seychelles is part of our vision to develop Seychelles through education and knowledge. With increasing global competitiveness and challenges, we consider it important to embark on the development of tertiary education at home. This will stimulate our people to pursue studies to the highest level and create knowledge jobs.

We have become renowned for the stewardship of our environment. Conscious that our natural resources are invaluable for fisheries and tourism, two pillars of our economy, and central to our way of life and conscious, too, of our duty to the world, we have created several marine parks and declared almost 50% of our land territory as preserved areas.

We are proud to host the two World Heritage sites of the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra, gifts of the Seychellois people to humanity. We are, Mr. President, protecting the last vestiges of paradise for humankind.

We consider that, in many ways, our nation can become a microcosm of the world to which UNESCO aspires. Our investment in health, education, housing and social security and the development of national consciousness have resulted in a harmonious nation which is today included among those with high human development, the highest ranked in Africa on the Human Development Index.

Yes, Mr President, with the assistance of development partners, not least UNESCO, we have made significant advances as a country, as a small island developing state.

But yes, Mr President, the task of nation-building and human fulfilment is never-ending. There is so much still to do and new challenges are emerging. What are some of the most pressing issues that preoccupy us and what are the possible solutions?

One of the most pressing issues today is climate change. Our stance on it is forceful and aggressive, and rightly so because it is based on our human right to exist as a nation. Climate change threatens our very survival.

Climate change is the challenge of the century, for if we fail to address it, many of our islands will disappear. We are in the front line, we are the most vulnerable and we will be the ones to suffer first and most significantly if we, if all countries, do not address the problem meaningfully and urgently. Climate change and its consequences loom over not just small island developing states but the whole world. We need to be proactive, and I urge UNESCO to strengthen its work related to SIDS so that we can address climate change adaptation through better research, capacity and resilience building.

We should not forget that all eyes will be on us in December in Copenhagen as we try to reach an agreement on how to confront our common enemy- climate change. The financial crisis should not serve as a pretext for us to back down on our respective responsibilities.

For many years, Seychelles and other SIDS have been advocating for the recognition of the economic and environmental vulnerability of SIDS. We are thankful to UNESCO for having been a strong ally in our efforts to recognise the specificities of SIDS. We look forward to continue working with the United Nations family in ensuring the effective implementation of the Mauritius Strategy for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. We also encourage UNESCO to collaborate with other international organisations that recognise the need for specific attention to the development priorities of SIDS, for increased synergy and improved results.

The way forward for SIDS – especially given our limited resources– is to harness the forces of nature. In this context, I appeal to richer and more advanced countries to support us in sustaining our development and our future through the transfer of technology, alternative energies and capacity building. UNESCO is well placed to spearhead this drive.

Mr President,

In Seychelles we were inclined to think that we were “a thousand miles from anywhere” and that the ocean isolated us from problems which could affect countries sharing land borders. Not anymore. The spate of pirate attacks on shipping in the western Indian Ocean and the taking of eleven Seychellois seamen as hostages have opened our eyes to another dimension of vulnerability.

We strongly support all efforts to assist the Somali people to bring about security, stability and peace to their country so that the task of development and nation-building in that part of Africa, for too long interrupted, can be pursued.

I commend UNESCO for renewing its commitment to Africa and retaining it as a priority. I urge UNESCO to consider how the resources and expertise available at Headquarters and the various offices on the continent could be brought together in a way that would provide greater focus, synergy and effectiveness in addressing the needs of the continent. More than ever we need a concerted effort if we are to make meaningful and sustained progress.

Monsieur le Président,

Le sujet « *Culture et Développement* », se révèle être d'une importance primordiale dans la conjoncture mondiale actuelle.

Si la démarche visant le développement a souvent placé l'homme au centre de sa problématique, elle a eu tendance de passer sous silence d'autres besoins tout aussi fondamentaux, tels que la possibilité de développer sa créativité, la sauvegarde et le renforcement du patrimoine culturel... Même les objectifs du millénaire ne font pas mention de la nécessité de considérer la culture comme un des piliers du développement. D'ailleurs, la distorsion entre la politique de développement et la culture des sociétés bénéficiaires d'une assistance économique et technique est à l'origine de nombreux échecs d'interventions décidées de l'extérieur.

Il se fait toutefois que la culture soit une part inaliénable du développement, et qu'à ce titre, elle doit intégrer tous les aspects liés à l'essor de la société dans ses dimensions multiples. Il serait donc inconcevable de séparer culture et développement, deux aspects d'une même réalité.

Notre préoccupation majeure est donc de savoir comment gérer le phénomène du développement et de s'assurer que celui-ci bénéficie à tous. C'est le défi auquel nous sommes confrontés, et il est immense.

Nous sommes convaincues que le développement ne peut être véritablement durable que s'il naît de l'identité culturelle et s'en nourrit.

Monsieur le Président,

La culture seychelloise est le fruit d'emprunts et d'échanges entre trois continents : Afrique, Asie et Europe, et cette diversité est la source de notre force et de notre harmonie. Nous demeurons convaincus que chaque individu dans notre société doit pouvoir vivre sa vie, et non pas la subir.

Ainsi, chaque citoyen, à tous les échelons de notre société, se voit offrir la possibilité de devenir producteur/acteur de culture pour dépasser le stade de simple consommateur. Nous nous efforçons non seulement de protéger et de transmettre aux générations futures un passé culturel, mais de les encourager à façonner notre créolité. Que ça soit par les arts, le spectacle vivant, la littérature sous toutes ses formes, la mode, la gastronomie et l'artisanat.

Ainsi notre culture devient de plus en plus un facteur stratégique du développement au niveau local. En fait, pour beaucoup de pays en développement, les industries culturelles constituent une voie qui offre un avantage comparatif pour favoriser le progrès social et économique.

Nous saluons ainsi les mesures prises pour consolider les institutions et les industries culturelles dans les petits Etats insulaires en développement en vue de contribuer au développement national. Nous insistons sur le renforcement de ces mesures, afin de permettre à un plus grand nombre de petits Etats insulaires d'en bénéficier.

Monsieur le Directeur Général,

Au nom du peuple seychellois, au nom de mon gouvernement et en mon nom personnel, je tiens à vous remercier très vivement de votre dévouement indéfectible à notre organisation. Depuis votre arrivée à la tête de l'UNESCO, vous n'avez épargné aucun effort pour assurer que l'UNESCO demeure la conscience vive de l'humanité. Je voudrais vous remercier tout particulièrement pour la promptitude avec laquelle vous avez toujours répondu à l'appel des dirigeants africains, pour que l'Afrique demeure une priorité au sein des programmes de l'UNESCO. Nous vous en sommes profondément reconnaissants et nous vous souhaitons bonheur et succès pour l'avenir.

Monsieur le Président, Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs,

Notre rêve, notre vision, est celle d'une société globale qui travaille pour tout un chacun, qui attache de la valeur au plus petit de ses membres et à la contribution qu'ils apportent ; une société globale créée non pas à l'image des puissants et matériellement riches, mais à l'image de toutes les composantes de l'humanité et de leurs richesses illimitées.

Notre rêve, notre vision est aussi celle d'une société globale où les gens se savent différents mais complémentaires, conscients que leurs différences accidentelles ne sont pas des frontières mais des particularités qui mettent en valeur celles des autres.

Nous remercions l'UNESCO pour son rôle catalyseur dans la création de cette société et nous réitérons notre engagement à cette tâche commune.

Mon remersye zot pour zot latansyon e swet zot lasazes, lape ek boner.