Good afternoon! I am very pleased to speak on the occasion of the formal closing of this HIV focal points workshop, held here in Chiang Mai during this week.

On behalf of UNESCO Bangkok, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of you, representing 4 National Commissions and 13 UNESCO field offices as well as development partners. My special thanks go to Mr. Chris Castle, the UNESCO Global HIV Focal Point, who travelled all the way from our headquarters in Paris and made substantial contributions to the workshop.

I am told that it has been a very rewarding and special week because experiences and ideas were shared and exchanged between people from different countries, laying a foundation for new and expanded UNESCO action on HIV across the region.

What makes today more special is the fact that we have partners from outside our Organization, who kindly helped us work towards the finalization of a new Regional Strategic Framework on HIV in Asia and the Pacific. I would like to especially acknowledge our colleagues Mr. Kah-Sin Cho from UNAIDS, Mr. Gray Sattler from UNODC and Mr. Ton Smits of the Asian Harm Reduction Network for joining us today.

Let me reflect on the reasons why we care so much about HIV/AIDS. HIV and AIDS is a severe threat to the development and wellbeing of people in Asia and the Pacific. It is not a health problem alone – it links to wider issues, including human rights, poverty, access to essential health and education services, and gender equality. UNESCO sees HIV and AIDS as a cross-cutting issue, a problem which Member States must tackle in a cross-cutting manner.

By now we are well aware of the root causes of the epidemic. The latest epidemiological analysis of HIV and AIDS in the Asian region, as recently presented by the independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, shows that the epidemic remains largely concentrated within three contexts: the sex industry, unsafe injecting drug use and unprotected sex between men.
Notwithstanding the evident threat and causes of the epidemic, education leaders in many member states, if not all, in the region have been shying away from addressing the issue. According to available research, however, while parents or teachers may worry that sex education will make adolescents curious and more prone to have sex at an earlier age, the reality is the contrary. In countries with progressive sexuality education programs, like Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, adolescent pregnancy rates and rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases are the lowest in the world. Talking openly about sexuality with adolescents leads them to take the issue seriously, and delays the age at which they start their sexual life. Besides this, UNESCO thinks that adolescents have the RIGHT to know about issues related to sexuality, reproductive health and HIV – adult shyness should not stand in the way of educating adolescents about these.

For these reasons, the new strategic framework that we have been working on is of great importance to UNESCO. It sets regional priorities and provides guidance not only to the HIV programs of the UNESCO Regional Bureau of Education in Bangkok, but also to the participating field offices and National Commissions.

Within the broader UNAIDS partnership, UNESCO leads the response to HIV among young people in Educational institutions. The Director General of UNESCO has designated EDUCAIDS, which is a comprehensive framework for action on AIDS by the Education sector, as one of UNESCO’s key Flagship Programs in support of achieving the broader Education For All goals. EDUCAIDS also links to broader UNESCO priorities like inclusive education, improving the quality of education and the promotion of mother tongue education.

Recently, at the global level, UNESCO has worked together with UN partners in developing guidance for Ministries of Education on how to design and implement better and more effective programs for what is now called “Sex, Relationships and HIV education.” This effort shows the importance that UNESCO sees in linking HIV prevention for young people to broader issues related to reproductive health and sexuality education. It also shows UNESCO’s wish to work in harmony with UN sister agencies, including UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, UNDP and UNODC, in joint efforts to increase access to essential information for adolescents in our Member States.

The new UNESCO Regional Strategic Framework for HIV and AIDS discussed this week attempts to link to key priorities in other UNESCO sectors, for example, Culture sector’s work on trafficking, drug abuse and HIV prevention among ethnic minority populations, and the Social and Human Sciences sector’s focus on human rights and reduction of stigma and discrimination, just to name a few. The Strategy also aims to enhance the work of the Communications and Information Sector on improving the quality of journalism and reporting around HIV and AIDS, helping to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by people
living with HIV, as well as people who are from ethnic or sexual minority populations.

The new Strategic Framework clearly positions UNESCO Bangkok future response to HIV through its HIV coordination, Adolescent Reproductive and School Health Unit – known as HARSH Unit, a cross-sectoral Unit, working and supporting different UNESCO sectors, namely, Education, Culture, Social and Human Sciences, Science and Communication and Information. The primary responsibility of the HARSH Unit is to coordinate UNESCO Bangkok’s work on HIV and AIDS, ensuring that it benefits from the combined strengths of each of the sectors. But more importantly, the HARSH Unit is ultimately responsible for supporting country-level responses to HIV through UNESCO colleagues in the field, in collaboration with our Member States, our UN partners and with civil society representatives.

As such, I am in full support of UNESCO’s work on HIV and AIDS. It will take wisdom and courage to address the current gaps that exist in education sector responses to HIV and AIDS in our Member States. We need more data and analysis about HIV/AIDS at both regional and country levels. This will enable us to effectively engage our member states in policy dialogue by helping them overcome reluctance to talk about sex and relationships in the context of HIV transmission and prevention. UNESCO needs to be aware of the sensitivity of the issue, but sometimes, as technical experts, we must take a more proactive advocacy role in trying to convince Member States to improve sexuality and HIV education for youth in schools. This would require us to look beyond what has been achieved to date and to put the agenda in a broader context of education reform including EFA and ESD.

In closing, I would like to thank you all again for your participation and contributions. Thank you Jan and other HARSH colleagues for organizing this important and timely meeting. I wish all of you a safe trip back home.

Thank you very much!