



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the SEAMEO Education

Ministers' Meeting

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 13 March 2008

His Excellency, Tan Sri Dr Zulkurnain bin Haji Awang, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, representing the Prime Minister of Malaysia,

His Excellency, Dr Bambang Sudibyo, President of the SEAMEO Council,
His Excellency, Dato' Dr Zulkefli bin A Hassan, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia, representing the host country,
Excellencies, Ministers of Education of Southeast Asia,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to address the opening ceremony of this 43rd SEAMEO Council Conference.

I would like to extend my special thanks to Mr Dato' Seri Hishammuddin bin Tun Hussein for his generous invitation to participate in this important event. I would also like to thank Mr Dato' Mustapa Mohamed for his warm welcome.

I wish further to express my gratitude to the Malaysian Government for their very kind hospitality. I am delighted to be here again in Kuala Lumpur, on what is my second official visit to Malaysia as Director-General of UNESCO. I have been here a number of times in my former career as member of the Japanese Government.

I have long wanted to attend a meeting of the SEAMEO Council of Ministers. Since the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between our two

organizations in 1975, UNESCO has undertaken many joint activities with SEAMEO, both with the Secretariat and with the different specialist centres. In order to better adapt this collaboration to changing needs in the sub-region, I am pleased to announce that later this morning I will sign an updated MOU with the new Director of SEAMEO, Dr Ahamad bin Sipon, from Malaysia. This will provide a more structured framework for expanding our cooperation in education, science, and culture across Southeast Asia.

In addition, with the ascension of Brunei Darussalam to UNESCO in 2005, and the return of Singapore last year, all members of SEAMEO are now also Member States of UNESCO. This provides another reason, and opportunity, to strengthen collaboration.

The success of our joint activities has in large part been thanks to a series of pioneering and proactive SEAMEO directors. UNESCO looks forward to even greater achievements in the future under SEAMEO's new Director, based on the updated MOU.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO and SEAMEO share broad and multifaceted mandates. This breadth is a major asset at a time when interdisciplinarity is universally acknowledged as vital to meeting the complex challenges of a globalizing world.

Through these brief remarks, I wish to highlight some of these challenges, and how, working together, we may address them.

I shall start with education, and in particular our overarching goal of achieving Education for All (EFA).

It was here in Southeast Asia – in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 – that the international community first made its pledge to provide basic education to all. This ambitious goal, founded on the belief in education as a fundamental human right and a vital lever for individual and social development, was

renewed in 2000, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Here, 164 governments, together with partner organizations from around the world, made a collective commitment to six goals aimed at dramatically expanding educational opportunities for children, youth and adults by 2015.

We meet today at the mid-way point toward this target date. Where do we stand?

I know that a special session will be devoted to this question later this afternoon. Let me now just outline some of the main achievements, and key challenges ahead.

Countries in Southeast Asia have much to be proud of. There have been significant advances, particularly with regard to expanding access to primary education. The enrolment rate in most countries is high – over 90%. The majority of Southeast Asian countries have also achieved, or are close to achieving, gender parity in primary education, though more needs to be done at the secondary level.

Southeast Asia has also witnessed some of the fastest economic growth in the world. I am convinced that your success in education, and in particular in EFA, has been one of the driving forces behind such rapid economic expansion.

Yet, despite such progress, significant challenges do remain.

In Southeast Asia, over three million children are still not in school. They are excluded by many, often overlapping, factors, including: poverty, remoteness, ill health, ethnicity and language, gender, and disability.

Poor education quality is another problem, leading to irregular attendance, grade repetition, dropout and low learning outcomes. The lack of trained teachers is a particularly serious issue. The number of primary school teachers in this sub-region has actually declined since 2000. When the Education Ministers of the E-9 group of high population countries – which

includes Indonesia from Southeast Asia – met in Bali earlier this week, they focused precisely on this issue: how to train more and better quality teachers.

Let us not forget, either, the 34.3 million adults in Southeast Asia who still cannot read or write. Often from society's poorest and most disadvantaged communities, these adults are deprived of one of the most powerful tools for development.

These excluded groups are among the most difficult to reach. They also demand greater investment, both financially and educationally. But if education really is to be for all, then we must develop targeted policies to meet their needs.

Left unattended, these inequalities in education may widen and pose bigger problems in the future. Yet, if the education challenges still facing Southeast Asia can be overcome, then the sub-region will be even stronger, both in terms of social cohesion and economic growth.

It is therefore very encouraging to see that quality and inclusion figure at the top of this meeting's agenda. I also wish to recognize the mid-decade EFA assessments, which all countries in the sub-region have been undertaking, and which will feed into the policy discussions.

Supported by UNESCO and other development partners, these assessments have focused on disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They have been truly country-driven exercises, aimed at identifying national needs and priorities. They are already regarded as a model for other regions to follow.

With most of the national assessments, and sub-regional synthesis reports, now being finalized, this meeting provides an ideal occasion to turn their results into concrete policy recommendations.

UNESCO organized an expert meeting last month, in historic Jomtien, which identified key strategies for tackling the related issues of quality, equity and

inclusion. I hope that this meeting will see these translated into real commitments for action.

This sub-region is rich in good practices for raising quality and promoting inclusion.

I think in particular of the innovative strategies for mobilizing ICTs for education that many countries have developed, and that are showcased in the exhibition organized by the Malaysian Ministry of Education in conjunction with this Meeting.

Quality, equity and inclusion are global challenges, as the 2008 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* has shown. The EFA High-Level Group, when it met last December in Dakar, also called for priority attention to be given to these areas. The countries of Southeast Asia have the opportunity to show the way forward.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I said at the beginning that the multisectoral mandates of UNESCO and SEAMEO give our two organizations a unique capacity to respond to contemporary challenges. This certainly applies to the challenge of EFA. Let me give two examples.

First: if education is to be inclusive and of quality, it must be grounded in cultural realities. It must be responsive to, and respectful of, the diversity of cultures and languages that exist in the world. The promotion of linguistic diversity is particularly important in the provision of quality education, the transmission of knowledge and values, and the fight against illiteracy.

UNESCO and SEAMEO have a valuable role to play in strengthening this link between education and culture. We both have many projects in this area. Let us look at how we can better combine our efforts.

Second: if education is to be of quality, it must also be relevant to learner needs. Of growing importance today, is the need to learn to live sustainably. Our planet is at risk – as a result of global warming, as well as other pressures such as population growth and urbanization. I will be giving a lecture on this subject tomorrow at the invitation of the Malaysian Academy of Sciences, which may be of interest to you. I shall ask that my speech be made available later.

As lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO is working to integrate the principles and practices of sustainability into all aspects of learning and education. Strengthening the quality of basic science education is one important aspect of this endeavour, another is enhancing the role of culture in environmental conservation. Both are areas where our two Organizations could collaborate more closely in the future.

There is also potential for strengthened cooperation in science and technology for sustainable development, especially in human and institutional capacity-building. A new centre on South-South Cooperation in Science, Technology and Innovation has just been established in Kuala Lumpur under the aegis of UNESCO. It will provide an important hub for networking and exchanging information and good practice, both within the sub-region and beyond.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Southeast Asia has made important progress towards EFA. Let us make this progress for all.

Strong political commitment is the key to success. I therefore call on those Ministers present here today to look again at the education systems for which they are responsible, and at how they need to be changed to reach those not yet reached.

UNESCO will be at your service towards this end. And I hope that, through strengthened collaboration with SEAMEO, we will be able to better support your needs.

The outcomes of this Council meeting will have important implications for the global policy reflections led by the EFA High-Level Group, as well as for broader international dialogue on education, in particular through the International Conference on Education, the next meeting of which – in November this year – will focus on the issue of inclusion.

It remains for me to wish you a very successful meeting. UNESCO will be following your deliberations very closely.

Thank you.