

Opening Plenary Speech:

**UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable
Development**

**Graça Machel
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Minister Schavan,
Mr Burnett,
Excellencies,
Colleagues and friends,
Good morning.

Let me begin by thanking UNESCO and the government of Germany for inviting me to address this Opening session.

So here we are again. Some of us were in Jomtien in 1990 and many of us were in Dakar in 2000. At both those meetings promises were made, messages were crafted and we went away having pledged to achieve wide scale educational change for children. We spoke of the right of all children, young people and adults to an 'education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be'. We pledged ourselves to primary education for all children.

In Jomtien, in Dakar, in multiple capitals around the world

commitment after commitment has been made in relation to educational provision – access, quality, style and content... yet over the years those commitments remain partially unfulfilled. How many of us were there when promises were made to provide access to quality education for all the world's children, and pledges were made and recorded to provide the resources to make such access a reality. How many of us were present when the pledge was made that any resource poor country that could develop a comprehensive and costed national education plan would be provided with the financial resources to implement that plan? Yet years have gone by, myriad national education plans have been produced and myriad plans have gone under resourced.

How can it be that in 2009 we still have tens of millions of primary school aged children across the worlds which are not in school? How can it be that in 2009 we still have critical shortages of trained teachers and physical infrastructure to help achieve even the goal of primary

education for all children? After all these years, why do we continue to have such marked gender inequality in educational access and outcomes for girls? Or that so many of our children who make it to or through secondary school do so without gaining the skills or knowledge to equip them for meaningful employment or richer lives?

Yes, we have made some progress in that the number of children not in primary school has dropped from over 100 million to 75 million since Dakar – but my challenge to you is that that drop in numbers is nowhere near enough in the time that has lapsed. There are still 75 million – 75 MILLION – children without access to primary education; for many millions more children the quality of the education they are given access to is blatantly inadequate and the resources to improve quality and access seem to have stagnated instead of increasing to the levels promised.

Yet here we are: 19 years after Jomtien, 9 years after

Dakar and halfway through the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. If we are to avoid meeting again in 2015 and being forced to admit to our continuing failure to fulfil our promises to our children, we need to be more decisive, strategic, sustained and meaningful action – and we need to take those actions now.

It is impossible to consider any educational agenda at present without taking into account the impacts of the crisis that has gripped world financial markets and economies. Economists, politicians, commentators: many people have their own interpretation of the causes and possible solutions for the market volatility and economic uncertainty that has led to the severe downturn in economies worldwide.

I am not an economist. I cannot explain these current issues in terms of economic theories. However, it seems clear to me that the reckless pursuit of profit for the sake of profit, the greed of chasing money while circumventing

moral or ethical boundaries and the valuing of material resources above people have fuelled this breakdown of the world economic system. A growing moral bankruptcy has fuelled a financial bankruptcy and unless we act decisively, it is our children who will reap the whirlwind of another generation's irresponsibility.

In tackling the current global economic crisis, we have an opportunity to build a new world order, not simply tinker at the edges of a failed system or recreate the corrupt systems that have imploded on us. And education has a crucial role to play in that restructuring. We know that education is key to individual growth as well as social, economic and political development. Yet education does not take place in a vacuum. I believe that the best education, of whatever kind, promotes the development of strong value systems to guide the learner. Having been involved in educational agendas in Africa and internationally for many years, I have learned that we need education that empowers learners with knowledge,

skills AND values.

If education does not help to bridge the huge gap between the rich and the poor, then I would have to question its end value and argue that it would not be sustainable. How sustainable can education be if it does not help us learn to protect our environment and live in peace with nature rather than at war with our planet?

I want to see education that empowers young people to question, to develop their minds and skill sets, to make choices, to find meaningful employment and to play constructive roles in their families, their communities and their nations. I want to see education that enables young people to value other human beings, encourages them to understand the importance of equality and equity and helps them to recognise the importance of collective responsibility and action. I want to see education that produces young people who will not tolerate their peers living in abject poverty in the midst of plenty; young

people who will be outraged by inequality and impatient to bring about change.

As educators, administrators, politicians and activists – individually and collectively - those of us attending this conference have the opportunity to promote education that enables us to rebuild a stronger, more sustainable, more accountable world. As an organisation, UNESCO, because of its mandate and mission has both an opportunity and a responsibility to fulfil in this regard.

We have the knowledge, the technology and the skills available to turn this situation around. We know how to prevent discrimination against girls at school. We know what we need to do to provide education for all primary aged children. We have set targets, goals, parameters and developed countless campaigns and policies – yet financial resources still lag behind these commitments and policies – and that points to a failure of political will – nationally and internationally. With political will we can achieve our

goals even with limited resources; poor countries like Malawi and Bangladesh have managed to make significant progress in areas of gender parity.

The past few months have made it clearer that the failure to meet past pledges has not been because of a lack of money. For example, globally, we have enough military hardware in existence to destroy the world several times over, yet military expenditure continues to grow. In the last quarter of 2008, Northern nations poured billions and billion of dollars into maintaining the banking system – and at very short notice.

UNESCO estimates that only 7 billion dollars would be needed to assist low income countries to meet the key educational goals set internationally. Yet resources pledged over decades are still not made available.

At a time of economic uncertainty, it is even more important that we increase our efforts to deliver these

resources – and that implies shifting our own, adult value systems. We must make greater efforts to make our governments and international bodies understand that our children need more books, not more guns in their hands. We need to ensure that our national and international budgets reflect that understanding. We need also to ensure that those resources are spent developing educational opportunities that promote knowledge, skills AND values.

UNESCO has a mandate that includes support to countries in the development of education, including curriculum reform and teacher training. We need to ensure that curricula develop both the minds and characters of our children – and that teacher training produces teachers that can deliver on all three strands of a valuable education: knowledge, skills and values of equality, equity, and respect for everyone.

I would like to believe that in my home we promote values

such as caring, equity, honesty, integrity and promoting the wellbeing of the collective, not just the individual. I want to see those values reflected in the education of not just my grandchildren but of children across Africa and the rest of the world. Much of the knowledge we have gathered about HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB and other health emergencies show us that education is not a luxury, is not even simply a right. It is a potential life saving measure. We have the opportunity to promote that life saving measure – let us make sure we use it.

I hope that when we meet again in 2015, it is because we can look our children in the eye and at ourselves in our mirrors, knowing that we have at last moved from rhetoric to significant action and fulfilled our promises of access to good quality, sustainable education to our children and each other.

Thank you.

