

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of Human Rights Day**

10 December 2004

Over fifty years ago, when it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations General Assembly recommended that the Governments of Member States “cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions”. From the outset, therefore, the publicization of the Declaration through educational processes was an integral part of its general dissemination for the purpose of consolidating world peace. It may be noted that, while the United Nations Secretary-General, the specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations also were called upon to disseminate the Declaration as widely as possible, the greatest responsibility was placed upon national governments.

Since then, human rights education has moved on considerably and is certainly no longer focused on disseminating a particular text, although the Declaration continues to be a foundational document for all human rights education. Important developments in this field have taken place in recent years within the framework of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) but much remains to be done. While some countries have well-developed educational programmes for promoting awareness of and respect for human rights, elsewhere human rights education for children, young people and the general population needs to be strengthened considerably.

To highlight this fact, UNESCO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are dedicating their efforts on Human Rights Day 2004 to human rights education. On this day, furthermore, the United Nations General Assembly is devoting a special plenary session to human rights education, marking the end of the UN Decade and providing an opportunity to consider the way forward. In recognition that national efforts can benefit from an international framework of cooperation and action, it will be proposed that a World Programme for Human Rights Education be proclaimed to begin on 1st January 2005. In its first phase (2005-2007), the World Programme would promote the integration and implementation of human rights education within national school systems at the primary and secondary levels. This is an area of particular interest and concern for UNESCO.

In UNESCO’s perspective, human rights education is important not only for the promotion and protection of human rights but also for education itself. In particular, human rights education should be seen as part of the content and purpose of quality education for all (EFA) and within the framework of the fulfilment of the right to education. All human rights – civil, cultural, economic,

political and social – are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent. Believing that all human rights are equally important to ensure a decent living for all, UNESCO considers the right to education as a key right because it unlocks the enjoyment of other human rights. Without education – education of good quality - people have very limited opportunities to create a better life.

The cultivation of respect for the human rights of all should be an integral component of everyone’s learning, not only in formal schooling but also through a range of educational experiences throughout the life-span. Human rights education involves learning about one’s own rights and those of others, but it goes beyond this to include learning that human rights are a shared responsibility with practical consequences for how we live together. Such learning, please note, cannot be obtained from books alone or simply from curriculum content but must also be acquired from educational processes, pedagogical methods and the educational environment within which learning takes place. In other words, human rights education involves learning by doing.

Thus, human rights education is about acquiring not only knowledge but also skills and the ability to apply them; it is about developing values, attitudes and behaviour that uphold human rights but also about taking action to defend and promote them. It involves learning about human rights through the practice of human rights.

On Human Rights Day 2004, let the theme of human rights education stimulate a redoubling of efforts to promote, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms”. The task of building a universal culture of human rights is far from complete but the Declaration points the way forward when it proclaims that “every individual and every organ of society ... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms”. Human rights education is a shared duty of us all.

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