

41st General Conference of UNESCO

Plenary – Intervention by H.E. Kristján Thór Júlíusson

Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture of Iceland

10 November 2021

Mr President of the General Conference,

Mr Chair of the Executive Board,

Madame Director-General,

Distinguished Delegates,

Iceland is a longstanding partner of UNESCO and an active supporter of multilateralism. We are firmly committed to UNESCO's mandate and basic principles – Iceland shares UNESCO's goals of promoting peace and security through collaboration in education, science, culture, and communication.

As we announced in June 2018, Iceland is a candidate to the UNESCO Executive Board at the elections taking place next week. The candidacy is supported by the other Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, which we work closely with. UNESCO is one of Iceland's key partner organizations in supporting the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals, our joint vision for the next decade.

Excellencies,

Recent world events of the COVID-19 crisis have further exposed the digital divide and shed light on new opportunities. As we continue our path towards increasing digitalisation, bridging the digital divide will be key to fulfil our promise of leaving no one behind. UNESCO's contribution in this area has the potential to be crucial towards building a better and more equitable and sustainable future for all.

We must not lose focus on the importance of including gender equality in every aspect of UNESCO's work and we welcome the Medium-Term Strategy's focus on a gender-transformative approach. We must continue our efforts at ensuring equal access of all genders to education, eradicating gender-based violence, and promoting women's empowerment. For this to be possible, we all need to be active participants – We therefore emphasise the importance of the increased engagement of men in this process.

The human rights-based approach is central to UNESCO's programmes and needs to be further strengthened – This must also include a special concern for people identifying as LGBTI+, whose marginalisation can negatively affect their ability to exercise their rights, access to society, and safety.

Mr President,

Education is a fundamental human right of which should be accessible to everyone. We should continue to focus on ensuring inclusive and equitable high-quality education

at all levels. We also need to continue work on co-ordinating education for sustainable development and educating the world's population on the adverse effects of climate change. The effects of climate change are much too visible, both in my country Iceland, but also in many of the Small Island Developing States.

Respect for fundamental freedoms, pluralistic media and freedom of information is vital to every society. UNESCO is doing important work on promoting freedom of expression, but there is no doubt that media freedom and the safety of journalists is under threat. Governments and civil society must work together to reverse this trend.

We welcome UNESCO's initiative and work on the recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence – An important first step in ensuring that emerging technologies benefit humanity. The UNESCO recommendation on open science also serves as an important tool to define shared values and principles while bringing science closer to citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Iceland's development policy we have placed emphasis on the quality of basic education and improved access to education in developing countries. We continue building on Iceland's partnership framework agreement with UNESCO, including our support for the CapED programme.

As of last year, Iceland joined forces with other donors for UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication. The programme makes important contributions to the development of media and capacity building of media professionals.

Recently we have also brought four of Iceland's UN University programmes, focused on capacity development training in developing countries, under the auspices of UNESCO, in order to build new partnerships. The Category 2 Centre, GRÓ, was founded last year and builds on the long-standing work of four training programmes in the fields of geothermal energy, fisheries, land restoration and gender equality.

Dear friends,

Iceland's candidacy to the UNESCO Executive Board is in line with our desire to strengthen Iceland's commitment to the Organization and the realisation of UNESCO'S mandate, both through its normative work and work on the ground. As a member of the Executive Board, we wish to continue the work of others on good governance – Aligned with our vision for an active and effective UNESCO. We hope to have your full support at the elections next week.

I thank you.