

Message from Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2011

Ten years ago, the international community came together to highlight the importance of dialogue among cultures and its commitment to diversity by unanimously adopting the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

With this historic declaration, the States of the world recognized cultural diversity as the common heritage of humanity.

All cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind. Cultural diversity is a strength. Its defence is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. Recognition of this diversity can accelerate mutual understanding and crafting a common space around shared values. No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe human rights or to limit their scope.

An understanding of cultural diversity is an ally in the pursuit of development. Several decades of international programmes have shown that there is not a single development model that is applicable to all countries and to all cultures. Acknowledgement of cultural diversity is the only thing that can help us to implement appropriate programmes.

UNESCO has sought to promote the importance of cultural diversity for more than 20 years by drafting international development policies that are more effective and more sustainable. The groundswell of democracy surging through the Arab World in 2011 is proof of the universality of the aspiration to freedom and dignity. It confirms the relevance of the 2001 Declaration and the necessity of ensuring that its principles are put into practice.

The adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and that of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) were major steps forward in winning recognition of such diversity. The United Nations resolution on culture and development, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December 2010, is another major breakthrough that underlines the contribution of culture and cultural diversity to sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Such progress reflects a positive trend. This new awareness must take material form in action to support population groups and cultural dialogue. We must understand such diversity if we are to strengthen cooperation among States, tackle common challenges together and learn to live together in modern, often heterogeneous, societies. Therefore, I appeal to governments, NGOs and civil society to contribute to the improvement of our intercultural skills through the arts, sport, humanities and language learning and to enhance our diversity for the benefit of all.