UNESCO Speech
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FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY: SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH
HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM

I would like to first thank the organizers of this conference, the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, the National Museums of Liverpool and the International Slavery Museum, for the invitation to contribute to this event as a keynote speaker.

UNESCO is particularly pleased that the pioneering project of Human Rights Museums has already received a wide support from leading museums and institutions working on issues of racism, discrimination and human rights abuses in many countries.

As you know, my Organization provided its auspices to the successful inaugural conference “Museums Fighting for Human Rights”. Addressing emerging social and ethical challenges and fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace through the action of museums is an innovative initiative that is consonant to UNESCO’s mission to, further equality among human beings of all origins, beliefs and backgrounds.

At this regard, I would like to pay a tribute to Mr David Fleming for creating and building this brilliant initiative.

The theme of this year’s gathering “Fighting for equality: social change through the human rights activism” has never been more relevant than today. In a world more interwoven than ever, ensuring that every identity, whether ethnic, religious or linguistic has its place in our societies becomes a main priority. Cultural diversity was acknowledged by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in 2001, as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. Ten years later we are still far from the goal of having
cultural diversity valued, enjoyed, genuinely accepted and embraced as permanent feature that enriches our societies. ¹

The alarming findings of the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, south Africa) have not subsided. The Durban Review Conference held in April 2009 only confirmed the persistence of these phenomena and the urgency of taking effective action, asking for a collective action, since if we all work together we become agents for changing our society.

The main responsibility in this domain lies of course with governments. It is up to governments to enact legislation, to elaborate policies and to ensure their effective monitoring and evaluation.

Nevertheless, the fight for equality does not belong only to public institutions. This fight cannot be won unless other actors such as the media, non-governmental organizations and civil society join the ranks with the common aim to promote equality and interaction, social harmony and integration, respect for tolerance and diversity among ethnic, cultural and religious communities.

This message comes very strong from a variety of UN documents and Declarations. For example, the 1998 UN Declaration on human rights defenders recognizes already in its preamble, the role of individuals, groups and associations in fostering knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. A lot is expected from such actors in making the public aware of ‘burning’ human rights issues and in strengthening among others understanding, tolerance, peace and friendly relations among nations and among all racial and religious groups.

More recently Declaration on human rights education and training, adopted in March 2011 by the Human Rights Council, highlights the crucial contribution that can be made by various actors within society. Educational institutions, the media, families, local communities, civil society institutions and non-governmental organizations, human rights defenders and the private sector can play a vital role in contributing to

the prevention of human rights abuses and to the eradication of all forms of stereotyping, incitement to hatred, and the harmful attitudes relating thereto.  

In this context, museums play an essential role. Their primary purpose is the scientific work of safeguarding and preserving heritage as a whole. Nevertheless, actually, they are not only considered as a centre for conservation study and a reflection on heritage and culture, away from the reality but a dynamic place that gives an insight of the major issues of our time. Thus, the museums have increased their social responsibility. The INTERCOM Declaration of Museum responsibility to promote Human Rights adopted in November 2009, establishes that it “is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background”. This new active role of the museums is reflected in the work that the Federation of International Human Rights Museums carries out. I congratulate the National Museum of Liverpool for its leadership in creating this innovative initiative.

Indeed, museums can help making a difference against the denial of human rights and for the remembrance of human rights abuses. Museums, places where ideas can be explored, stories can be told and emotions expressed, provide an ideal setting for raising awareness about past suffering and building therefore in the minds of people the defences of peace, justice and human rights.

I would like to dedicate a few words to possible avenues whereby museums can contribute to furthering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Two main functions can be discerned: on the one hand memory education and raising awareness of human rights abuses and on the other contributing to the acceptance of cultural diversity thus furthering social inclusion.

Concerning the first function, in most countries human rights abuses, many of which have left their indelible mark on societies, are being confronted openly and without
inhibitions. While the tendency of the past was to erase these facts from the collective memory and to re-write history, today, this tendency has been reversed in favour of greater openness and sincerity. Knowing about the torts of the past is not only the right of victims and their families or their comrades in an effort to establish the truth and bring justice. It is the legitimate claim of society as a whole to know, to understand, to empathize and to learn from past errors.

This is where human rights museums have a major role to play. They can contribute to the reconstruction of history, or at least of some of its important pieces, through the collection and the systematic analysis of documents and relevant testimonies. This way the tangible and intangible marks of the past find their path to the collective memory of peoples all over the world. This way, present and future generations can become aware of the suffering that this world is continuously witnessing in the hope that such atrocities will never be repeated.

To name but a couple of examples in which my Organization has been involved, that is the case of the Memorial Museum of Dominican Resistance, opened in May 2011, the eve of the 50th anniversary of the overthrow of the dictatorship. The main purpose of that museum is to remind humanity of the struggles of several generations of Dominicans during the dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo. Its Documentary Heritage, which is included since 2009 in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, seeks to raise awareness of the issues relating to respect for human rights by acknowledging the abuses of the past, building collective consciousness and memory, and creating a stronger society.

In South-East Asia, UNESCO, together with the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, supports since 2009 the project of the preservation of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, which aims at preserving and conserving in a safe way all the archives containing prisoner’s photos, confessions, biographies and Khmer rouge magazines. This unique memory site is the only museum in Cambodia focusing on contemporary history. Moreover, through school visits, it plays a fundamental educational role for young people and students. Preserving and safeguarding the memory of this place is a way to foster a culture of peace and dialogue and prevent such tragedies from happening again.
Another important initiative is the human rights museum and new center in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In 2004, the ensemble of buildings and grounds on a 17-hectare military facility were dedicated to the memory of the 30,000 disappeared victims of the last military government. The establishment of the International Centre for the Advancement of Human Rights follows a decision adopted by UNESCO’s Member States on 17 November 2008.

It is highly symbolic that the Centre is located on the premises of the former Naval School of Mechanical Engineering (ESMA), which served as the largest clandestine detention and extermination centre during the dictatorship. Thus it is transforming a place of horror and death into a place of light and life.

The core objective of the Centre is to enhance and promote education through and for remembrance, which is considered as an antidote to abuses of human rights and as an obvious mechanism for preserving and furthering peace and international security.

In March 24, 2004: President Nestor Kirchner, answering the extraordinary mobilization of the mothers and grandmothers of the "disappeared" since 1977, announced that this place would become a "museum of memory". The organizations of human rights have done a wonderful job since then in helping to organize visits of this place in small groups.

Holocaust remembrance is another important feature of UNESCO’s Programme. UNESCO recognizes that teaching the lessons of the Holocaust is fundamental for promoting respect for human rights and the values of tolerance and mutual respect. The Organization works closely together with The Holocaust and the UN Outreach Programme and other major specialized institutions to promote educational resources that use the lessons of the Holocaust to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills that will help students become more tolerant and prevent future genocides. UNESCO cooperates with the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, located in Paris, which is the largest resource centre in Europe dedicated to the history of the
Holocaust. Moreover, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps were included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1979.

UNESCO has also placed emphasis on bringing into light another inhumane and degrading practice that has marked our history for centuries; namely slavery and slave trade. Its Slave Route Project on intercultural dialogue and cultural pluralism aims in particular at elucidating this tragedy and its effects on history and at contributing to mutual understanding, coexistence, and peace among people, particularly by encouraging reflection on the prejudices inherited from slavery. The Organization helps States in supporting multidisciplinary scientific research, the preservation and promotion of sites and buildings related to the slave trade and slavery, collection and preservation of written records and oral traditions in connection to the slave trade and slavery.

With this project, in cooperation with the international community, UNESCO is helping to establish the historical truth about that tragedy, fulfil the duty of remembrance, promote pluralism and intercultural dialogue, foster the establishment of a culture of peace and social cohesion and stimulate the creation of new identities and forms of citizenship derived from the slave trade and slavery.

Raising awareness of human rights abuses is closely connected with the second function of the human rights museums, that of promoting inclusive societies through an acceptance of the other regardless of her/his different or multiple identity.

I agree with those who think that museums are no longer mono-cultural, concentrating on the histories of dominant social groups. They increasingly embrace the history of minorities paying attention to groups that for long have been oppressed, alienated and excluded. Telling the stories of such peoples helps to break the cloak of silence and neglect that is often cast upon them. It helps deconstruct longstanding prejudices and stereotypes and bridge tensions of the past. By offering a different view on the ‘other’, one that is based on knowledge and understanding, this type of museums contributes to setting the foundations of peace and tolerance in our societies.
The current trend of establishing so called ‘migration museums’ in different countries around the world is an interesting phenomenon that fully responds to the new vision on the social responsibility of museums.

Migrant populations face rising tensions. From the Van Gogh affair in the Netherlands in 2004 to the so-called ‘crise des banlieues’ in France in 2005, there is an urgent need to give the migrant generations (the young people as well as their parents) a voice, in order to foster inclusion, integration and protect their right to be different. Listening to individual stories may help to deconstruct stereotypes. The combination of Memory, History and Narration may also allow to approach the complex phenomenon of migration in all its different perspectives.

Migration museums in countries such as United States with Ellis Island, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom have been created to facilitate transmission between generations as well as exchanges and interaction between migrants and the host populations. The work carried out by such museums has different objectives: first of all, the acceptance by the host societies of the contributions made by migrants; the recognition of the diversity and wealth of the cultures of origin and the right to a dual-belonging. Secondly, building the sense of belonging enables the communities to feel as an integral part of the nation; to find common ground and contribute to a national identity. And finally, they also aim at deconstructing stereotypes through the awareness-raising and education by shedding light into the reasons that incite migrants, and particularly refugees, to leave their land.

UNESCO and the International Organization of Migrants decided to work together to promote the exchange of information and experiences on the history of migration and the memories of migrants, notably by helping to set up and develop such museums in receiving countries. The first step of the project was a meeting of experts and representatives from ten receiving countries, in October 2006. This meeting gave the unique opportunity to launch an international network of specialists, including representatives of existing migration museums, receiving countries wishing to have such museums, as well as the main immigrant communities, and representatives from the world of education and science.
Concrete and practical strategies to encourage social integration and inclusion have become important in order to ensure that the lives of the many that are disadvantaged in society – those traditionally excluded or marginalized, those living in poverty – are protected and further improved. Museums have an important role in promoting the notion of a “society for all”, a society that ensures equal opportunities for all. Through the individual stories, photographs, documents and the activities proposed, museums help to sensitize about the grave abuses in human rights as a part of the tragic history of the society and their non-repetition, to deconstruct stereotypes and to raise public awareness about the importance of recognizing the other as an integral part of society.

UNESCO, an Organization created in 1945 to promote the values of peace, justice and human rights can only be supportive of such valuable initiatives as the permanent international network for human rights museums launched in 2010. We are counting a lot on the ideas that will be put forward during the deliberations of this meeting in order to identify the specific form and modalities of our cooperation.

Breaking the silence on the past and educating for the future is a task that the Federation of international Human Rights Museums and UNESCO should promote hand in hand.

With our sincere wishes for a successful conference.

Thank you for your attention

Angela Melo