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Advanced training, partnership co-operation and sustainable development

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I have great pleasure in accepting your kind invitation to speak at this closing session of your international seminar. Your debates have been extremely rich and encouraging for me, as I attended the World Conference on Higher Education organised by UNESCO in Paris only four weeks ago. In my position as the focal point of the UNESCO Chairs and the UNITWIN networks aimed at promoting new university postgraduate programmes, such as the sustainable development Chairs and networks, I have already had the privilege of familiarising myself with the exemplary action of your institution. I greatly appreciated the opportunity I had last year of visiting the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute (MAI) in Bari and I hope to be able to establish firmer links between the action of your institutes and the emerging action of certain Mediterranean universities, especially on the eastern coast of the Adriatic, with a view to promoting sustainable agriculture.

It goes without saying that the training choices that you have discussed set the position of advanced education in the future. In a multi-polar world characterised by possibly unprecedented fragmentation of perception and of levels of social acceptance, it is necessary more than ever to work for the emergence of values that will enable the common existence of individuals and peoples in the world and friendly contacts in science and technology and in social and cultural aspects.

The sustainable development concept that was the basis of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and of the series of theme summits promoted by the UNO system from 1992 to 1996 should not be confused with a discipline in social or natural sciences. Sustainable development is above all a model for planetary life, a conceptual matrix whose main lines were defined by Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit and which should enable man to flourish with respect of a viable equilibrium. Education reoriented towards this regulatory ideal enables the sharing of the objectives and values of sustainable development based on an economic, social and environmental triptych and also on governance, that is to say the understanding of the mechanisms of public decision making and of dialogue. Knowledge concerning sustainable development must then be directed towards action and mobilisation. This is the opposite of passive knowledge. There is no longer a need for 'frozen' knowledge but for a way of formulating the right questions, a way of generating awareness of significant information in a world in which the quantity of information is often inversely proportional to its collective pertinence.

Higher education institutions therefore have an essential mission—that of sharpening a planetary conscience and a global sense of responsibility and solidarity. Without abandoning their analytical capability, academics have the task of adopting a systemic approach that is respectful of all the dimensions of development and their interactions and effects in the long term.

A decisive feature for the completion of this systemic exercise is that academics should strengthen links with the spheres and communities concerned so that the analyses performed better express the needs and expectations of human communities and so that development projects are drawn up in coherence with the territories of these communities. Academics should also learn to articulate the different scales to shed light on strategies for action that allow for both the unity and diversity of the world.

This is in no way the replacement of one algorithm by another, claiming once again an optimum that is impossible to define in the face of a multiplicity of objectives that cannot be reduced to a common denominator. This means affirming the need to give a new value to the political domain, which must be submitted to rigorous ethics of synchronous solidarity with the present generation and diachronic solidarity with future generations. This ethic is also founded on the universalisation of citizenship, an objective from which we are very remote in practice.

It is certain that local communities, villages, 'terroirs' and towns, together with the drainage basins and the geological, climatic and hydrological units that have played such an important role in ancient history should see their role re-evaluated in the future. However, this scale must be linked to that of states and of the great regions of the world whose importance will grow, and, beyond this, to the scale of the planet. The different levels of responsibility must not serve as a pretext for irresponsibility. Academics must remain vigilant watchers and awakeners in this respect.

Finally, without giving up their critical function, academics can make more of a contribution to social cohesion by supporting initiatives of active citizenship, as the power of a citizen is not limited to his vote alone. This involves a more democratic occupation of public fields and the institutionalisation of the areas in which citizens' initiatives have their place and where effective control of political action can be assured. In this perspective, universities are called upon to make a greater contribution to local communities, to encourage the search for solutions to problems using local resources and skills. They are called upon to facilitate university entry for women in many countries where such access is still difficult, whereas the vital role of women in development and in the management and use of resources is unquestionable.

Agreement concerning a local, national or—even more so—planetary project cannot be reached without in-depth, permanent public debate, constant interaction between all development players, the de-professionalisation of politics and dialogue—which is difficult to establish—between civil society, decision makers and scientists.

Communication and mediation between scientists, the general public and decision makers form more than ever the pivot for the organisation of true citizens' participation in decision making. However, strict conditions are required. It is necessary that a true public debate—with a full hearing of all parties—must be made possible. It must be possible to discuss complex questions and, if necessary, they should be reformulated by the academics for whom they are intended. The latter cannot become theoretical alibis for compromises presented as being inevitable.

The universities can contribute to a still confused search for new forms of social link by taking seriously "these groupings, these solidarities being tested and their incessant composition and recomposition, by awarding more credit to the continuous creation of social aspects than to practices establishing doctrinal conformity" (Georges Balandier in *Le lien social en question*).

Sustainable development can only be conceived and strengthened in an autonomous and joint manner from a local to a global scale through partnership forms of co-operation in which university institutions can play the role of catalyst. This co-operation should implement the cultural development of every human community by setting up pluri-cultural vectors. Their plural way of thinking means that high education institutions provide privileged mediation in this respect.

Of course, the development of such co-operation means that these institutions must set up a series of priorities. Co-operation is becoming a true mission, complementing the three missions consisting of training, research and service to the community. In this respect, the geographic axes are clearly both north/south and south/north, together with south/south and north/north. The south/north axis cannot be simply identified with the north/south axis. It is not just a question of request for aid for development for the south, but a reciprocal contribution in which the south represents the revealing of the need to consi-

der culture as 'the key to the twenty-first century'. The diversification of educational contributors to partnerships is doubtless the feature most likely to lead to inter-disciplinarity and the plurality of representation of the same objects.

Having rapidly reviewed a few of the main lines emerging from international action programmes for the future of universities, I can only feel happy about the pertinence and quality of the discussions that I have heard. UNESCO is most content and I can assure you that it will do its best to fulfil its potential of skill to support the fruitful development of your initiatives.

Thank you for your attention.

