Opening speech

of Mr Indrajit Banerjee

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UNESCO

On the occasion of the International seminar on

 Information Accessibility for Learning:

From Development to Implementation of Guidelines

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Mr Marco Enrico Ricotti, Rector’s Delegate for Research, Polytechnic University of Milan

Ms Licia Sbattella,

Dear speakers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Seventy years ago, in the wake of a devastating world war, UNESCO was founded on the idea that peace must start with the human rights and dignity of every woman and every man. Especially the rights and dignity of those most marginalized - the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.

UNESCO estimates 93 million children under the age 14 to be living with a ‘moderate or severe disability’-- of these, 13 million experience severe disabilities. Approximately 62 million children of primary school age have a disability and 186 million children with disabilities have not completed primary school education. Furthermore, fewer than 2% of children with disabilities in developing countries are in school.

In this regard, UNESCO’s action in moving forward to promote, strengthen and support the facilitation of access to information and knowledge using ICTs for a shockingly large number of illiterate and socially and academically excluded disabled children–as well as for all disabled women and men, has most recently been framed by the endorsement of the *New Delhi Declaration on inclusive ICTs for Persons with Disabilities* at the 38th session of UNESCO’s General Conference in November 2015. The New Delhi Declaration, synthesized as the outcome document of the groundbreaking international conference entitled “From Exclusion to Empowerment: Role of Information and Communication Technologies for Persons with Disabilities”, organized by UNESCO and hosted by the Government of India from 24 to 26 November, 2014 in New Delhi.

The New Delhi Declaration communicates and demonstrates a common commitment to deliver a transformative vision which specifically targets and prioritizes in integrating the educational needs and academic aspirations of persons living with disabilities into the future education agenda.

Disability cuts across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We need to defend the rights of all children and adults with disabilities. We need more inclusive education, more fitting school settings, to promote quality learning with all learners as well as ensure that they have access to information taking the best out of the technological and scientific development.

UNESCO, as a partner of ICT for Information Accessibility in Learning (ICT4IAL), and as the UN system organization promoting a dialogue, collaboration and partnerships, holds utmost value in catalytic instruments such as the ND declaration which provide a basis for collaboration and partnerships such as these, in order to pave the way, over the next fifteen years, for new forms of action with regards to approaching and finishing the ambitious educational targets of the 2030 sustainable development agenda, as underpinned by the New Delhi declaration.

UNESCO, for many years now, has spearheaded global projects and activities to create ICT-enabled learning opportunities for the educationally underprivileged-- through the creation of Open Educational Resources.

This also includes the work of the *Broadband Commission for Sustainable Digital Development*, led by UNESCO and ITU, to advance the inclusive global roll-out of broadband. This includes UNESCO’s involvement in the *World Summit on the Information Society* and other regional and national initiatives.

A global framework for promoting access to information and knowledge for persons with disabilities must call upon all national and regional stakeholders in diverse fields to harness the power of cutting-edge digital communication technologies to grant learning opportunities that are truly equal and inclusive of all persons.

We speak of the digital age as if it involves everyone. But it doesn’t. Many technologies are designed without taking into consideration the fundamental *principles* of accessibility.

The principles for facilitating accessibility, when laid out and implemented in the form of specific *guidelines*- both legislative and technological- is what assists all stakeholders to make informed decisions with regards to providing accessible, affordable and inclusive ICT products to facilitate learning opportunities for their clientele.

Guidelines for information accessibility for learning in particular prove beneficial for governments of developing countries to tailor legal and budgetary frameworks, which strengthen national and regional capabilities for building all-inclusive education systems which account for the needs of marginalized disabled populations living in low and middle income countries, that is the approximate *eighty percent* of the total one billion persons who are currently living with disabilities in the world.

Stronger national policies for inclusion and equity and new policy guidelines on inclusion will prove beneficial for governments to develop relevant policy frameworks- such as the *Model Policy on Inclusive ICTs in Education for Persons with Disabilities* developed by UNESCO, G3ict and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to support governments in implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In light of these objectives, UNESCO joined forces with our distinguished ICT4IAL partners - to develop and implement a set of guidelines which would facilitate information accessibility for learning for all.

Today’s international seminar on the *Development and Implementation of Guidelines for Information Accessibility for Learning* hosted by the Polytechnic University of Milan, brings us to our final follow up discussion of a series of preceding meetings.

I’m very hopeful that our multidisciplinary collaboration over this period of time on the ICT4IAL project has harmonized our work on disability issues with regards to the creation of a powerful OER tool-- which is the policy guidelines that lay down the principles we must adhere to in order to facilitate information access for all disabled persons to become empowered members of Knowledge Societies.

With massive power of outreach, these guidelines are an openly available resource with translations in twenty-three languages and few more are underway, providing instructions and resources on how to create accessible materials with text, image, audio and video, which can be applied to all types of information produced.

Indeed, the mere creation and collection of accessible information and educational materials has very little significance unless we are able to create the conditions that facilitate for all people to exercise their right to access this information without restrictions based on their mere physical or other abilities.

In this regard, the guidelines additionally outline the various methods that can be leveraged to make the delivery of media accessible- these shall of course be elaborated upon in later presentations.

The successful launch of these guidelines has laid a very important foundation on how educational opportunities can be increased in effectiveness and outreach through the power of ICTs to help disabled persons become engaged and productive members and contributors to the creation, use, and dissemination of information and knowledge for learning.

It is now in my own reflection and interest that UNESCO stands ready to exploit to the fullest extent its development approaches in the areas of **A**dvocacy, **B**ridging, **C**apacity building and **D**issemination to assist and accompany its Member States and international network of governing bodies to support, strengthen and intensify a concrete implementation of these guidelines at all capacities.

Thank you.

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