



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Keynote Address by the Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, at the Inaugural Meeting of Commissioners of the 7th South African National Commission for UNESCO, held at the Sol Plaatje House

16 September 2021

I am delighted at this opportunity to welcome you all new Commissioners of the South African National Commission for UNESCO.

Your acceptance is an indication of the will to serve the structure you are appointed to and the interests of the country you are citizens of.

I will take this opportunity to briefly discuss the importance of UNESCO to South Africa.

As indicated by Professor Gijzen, the role of National Commissions is determined by the missions or aims of UNESCO.

UNESCO's mission is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through Education, Science, Communication and Information, and Culture.

This is done to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law, and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms that are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language, or religion.

The relevance of UNESCO to South Africa becomes immediately apparent when Article 1 of the UNESCO constitution is juxtaposed with Article 7, the Bill of Rights, from the South African constitution.

As I have alluded to earlier, Article 1 of the UNESCO constitution enjoins the organisation to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science, and Culture.

Article 7 of the South African constitution reads thus:

This Bill of Rights is the cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. It enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. The state must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights in the Bill of rights.

The South African constitution also enshrines the right to education in paragraph 29(1), the respect for Culture in paragraph 30.

South Africa recognises the importance of science in development by having a dedicated ministry to promote Science and Innovation was established.

South Africa thus has a similar philosophy to UNESCO. As such, membership to UNESCO assists South Africa to uphold its vision and allow South Africa to contribute to the international community based on its hard-earned freedom.

The following factors highlight the importance of UNESCO to South Africa:

Firstly, as an intellectual forum, UNESCO helps eradicate the effects of the long isolation which the South African academic community and the country suffered during the apartheid years.

Through access to the different UNESCO institutes that act as clearing houses of ideas and information, South Africans can access a broad spectrum of information that would otherwise not be easily obtained.

UNESCO also produces synoptic reports that, while providing scientifically sound information, are accessible to a non-specialist reading public and useful to decision-makers.

The World Reports are published in the fields of Education, Science, Culture and Communication.

South African intellectuals also get the opportunity to share their knowledge with the world by contributing to these reports or conducting projects and research, the outcomes of which can be fed to the UNESCO institutes.

In this regard, we always take pride in the work done by the Department of Science and Innovation, among other UNESCO competent line function Departments.

Secondly, UNESCO's ethical mission. As a country involved in the reconstruction of all facets of social life, South Africa needs points of reference to guide ethical behaviour.

The horrors of Apartheid highlight such a need; thus, South Africa stands to benefit from UNESCO's standard-setting capacity on the one hand. Still, it can also demonstrate its capacity in upholding human rights on the other.

UNESCO has a critical ethical mission. It prepares and promotes the adoption of international conventions and statutory recommendations by member states.

In this regard, the Department of Social Development leads our Natcom Social and Human Sciences Sector.

Thirdly, UNESCO's mission is to enhance cultural heritage and promote living cultures.

According to its Constitution, UNESCO is mandated to ensure the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science.

This responsibility is even greater today as wars, natural disasters, urbanisation and industrialisation increasingly jeopardise our heritage.

At the same time, the heritage is destined to play a significant role in development, especially in the growth in tourism, which in many countries constitute an essential source of income.

To ensure the implementation of this mandate, in 1972, UNESCO developed the Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

South Africa became a signatory to this convention on 10 July 1997, and the benefits, with regards to the protection of our heritage, is enormous, as implemented by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment; and the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture.

Finally, UNESCO's mission to promote the Free Flow of Information is to encourage the free flow of ideas by word and image and create more expansive and better-balanced dissemination of all forms of information contributing to the advancement of societies.

The need for the promotion of information-sharing has become more imperative as globalisation progresses.

South Africa is increasingly experiencing the effects, negative and positive, of belonging to the global village and, as such, requires empowerment to deal with its new situation.

In this regard, South Africa is likely to receive such empowerment from UNESCO's communication and information programme.

In this regard, we are proud to see the work done by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies.

Programme Director, let me now take this opportunity to thank the following two outgoing Natcom Sector Committee Chairpersons.

They have contributed enormously to the work of the South African National Commission for UNESCO.

They were not able to be here with us in person, but they are virtually connected.

The two are Professor Mandla Makhanya, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA), who chaired the Natcom Culture Sector Committee, and was with the National Commission from 2001 to 2019, the longest-serving member of all times; and

Mr Joe Samuels, the former CEO of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), chaired the Natcom Education Sector Committee and took the Education Sector Committee to new heights.

To Professor Makhanya and Mr Samuels, I thank you very much for your Contribution to the National Commission.

The Certificates of Appreciation will be handed to you soonest.

Programme Director, lastly but not least: We have the winner of the 2021 UNESCO International Literacy Prize in the house.

UNESCO has requested me to hand over the Diploma and Medal to the Executive Director of PUKU Children's Literacy Foundation, Mrs Elinor Sisulu, for winning the UNESCO King Sejong International Literacy Prize.

Ms Sisulu and her PUKU Children's Literacy Foundation have made our country proud.

On behalf of our people, we thank you again for being an excellent ambassador for literacy. We are so proud.

I thank you.