

## **Madam Irina Bokova on ‘Soft Power for Peace and Development – UNESCO and the SDGs’**

**16<sup>th</sup> August 2016**

Honourable Mangala Samaraweera, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne, Executive Director of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies, Honourable Ministers, Ambassadors, UN Colleagues, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am deeply honoured to speak at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies.

Lakshman Kadirgamar was a great statesman and politician. He was a man of intellect, a man renowned for his wit. He was, most of all, a great humanist, devoted to human rights and equal dignity, committed to peace in Sri Lanka on the basis of respect and dialogue. You just mentioned, Honourable Minister, how often he cited the Preamble of UNESCO’s Constitution that we never tire from repeating: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” It also reads that a peace based exclusively upon political and economic arrangements does not suffice to be lasting; peace requires the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind. This is what Lakshman Kadirgamar aspired to. He believed profoundly in Sri Lanka as a country united in its rich cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

In 1999, it was Lakshman Kadirgamar who made the proposal to the United Nations General Assembly to make Vesak Day an international day of celebration. In October 2001, speaking before the United Nations General Assembly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, he made a passionate appeal for the unity of humanity: Let us hope such a deep sense of the “togetherness” of all of humanity at times of great crises will continue to be pervasive. Lakshman Kadirgamar was tragically cut down, but his legacy lives on vibrantly today, here in Sri Lanka and, I would say, across the world. This Institute is one of his legacies. Housed in “the lighthouse,” this Institute is guided by a mission that Lakshman Kadirgamar would, no doubt, have approved: To engage in independent research of Sri Lanka’s international relations and strategic interests, to provide insights and recommendations that advance justice, peace, prosperity and sustainability.

Justice, peace, prosperity and sustainability. These values have deep roots in Sri Lanka – they are inter-linked and can only be taken forward together. This requires a new, comprehensive approach to human development and sustainability. I see this vision guiding the Government of Sri Lanka today. Last September, before the United Nations General Assembly, His Excellency President Maithripala Sirisena said: My understanding is not to have sectorally or group-wise isolated development but to have an inclusive model of development that is capable of uplifting development standards globally. He called this a “universal approach.” I see this as a definition of the new ‘soft power’ the world needs today, to respond to complex challenges that cross all borders.

These are, indeed, turbulent times. Globalization is opening vast opportunities for positive change, for trade and prosperity, for cooperation and dialogue. At the same time, we live in an increasingly fragmented world. Climate change is accelerating. Poverty remains enduring, revealing deep inequalities in and between countries. Conflicts remain aflame, tearing at the fabric of societies, causing humanitarian tragedies. We see the rise of extremism and violence across the world... with barbaric attacks in Paris, in Brussels, in Tunisia, in Indonesia, in Istanbul and in Iraq.

Today, perhaps more than ever, we must be guided by the values we share, our commitment to humanity as a single family. This is essential to taking forward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the Paris Climate Change Agreement. I am convinced these must be seen as a single agenda. An agenda for human rights and dignity. An agenda for poverty eradication and sustainability. In the words of its Declaration, this is an agenda “of the people, by the people and for the people.” No one must be left behind. Especially the most vulnerable, the most marginalised. No society stands alone. We stand together, on the same planet, and we share a single destiny. The promises of the new agenda embody a new transformative vision for peace and the planet.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals were developed in a process that involved all States, drawing on the key lesson of the Millennium Development Goals — that success requires national ownership, and that ownership means capacities. Very often we hear the appeal for a ‘paradigm shift,’ and I agree. It is a paradigm shift in its commitment to inclusion and ownership. It is a paradigm shift in its global vision, bringing all countries together, developed and developing, middle income with Small Island Developing States. Taking this forward calls for connected action across sectors, from education to water management to empowering girls and women, linking progress in human development with effective measures against climate change.

I know the commitment of Sri Lanka to the 2030 Agenda. We see this in the will that guides Sri Lanka’s unity Government. We see this in the commitment to yahapaalnaya (good governance) that underpins public policy. We see this in measures to promote reconciliation on the basis of dialogue and justice, to provide opportunities for a better future to all. We see this in the new focus on empowering girls and women.

Sri Lanka has suffered the terrible costs of 26 years of conflict – the country is guided today by a new vision of peace, built on respect, on dialogue, on promoting a new horizon for all women and men, drawing on Sri Lanka’s rich and great history of diversity. I wish to pledge here UNESCO’s support to Sri Lanka in all its efforts to consolidate gains, to catalyse new progress.

This starts with Sustainable Development Goal 4, “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” which UNESCO did so much to shape.

Our starting point is clear. Education is a human right, essential to dignity and empowerment. It is a multiplier for more inclusive and sustainable development. In advancing gender equality, poverty eradication, sustainability — it is a force for peace. Whether in Tokyo or Nairobi, Asuncion or New York, educating a child is the smartest investment a society can make in its future, in lasting peace. The evidence is overwhelming. UNESCO’s forthcoming Global Education Monitoring Report shows that, on average, every additional year of education boosts a person’s income by 10 percent and increases a country’s GDP by 18 percent.

Working with Member States and partners, UNESCO is leading forward the Education 2030 Framework for Action. We are working to reposition literacy, through the creation of a Global Alliance for Literacy. UNESCO has long worked with the Government of Sri Lanka, to bolster its efforts to ensure quality education for all, to train teachers, to deepen innovation in vocational and professional training. We know that Sri Lanka has a success story to tell when speaking about literacy and education. Now there is a need to move on quality. This is embodied in the South Asian Centre for Teacher Development at Meepe, a UNESCO Category 2 Centre, where I will participate tomorrow in a Forum on Quality Education through Effective Teacher Development.

We see the same commitment in Sri Lanka’s National Institute of Education, whose ‘Open School Programme’ was awarded the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize on International Literacy Day last year. This engagement is expressed in Sri Lanka’s work to harness new technologies to drive innovation in education, especially higher education. In Kandy, I had a rich discussion at the University of Peradeniya with the Vice Chancellor and faculty on the interface between education, science and policy, a subject also at the centre of the dialogue this morning with the Minister of Science, Technology and Research and the scientific community.

I look forward to deepening UNESCO’s partnership with Sri Lanka – especially, in advancing education for peace and human rights, education for global citizenship, education for sustainable development, to bolster reconciliation through new skills for dialogue and solidarity.

Empowering girls and women must be a special priority – Sri Lanka is participating in UNESCO’s project, supported by China/HNA, to enhance girl’s and women’s right to quality education through gender sensitive policy-making, teacher development and pedagogy.

This is not only a human rights issue – it is about building more just and inclusive societies. The benefits reach across the board. The IMF estimates that if women participated in the labour market to the same extent as men, GDP could increase by 5 percent in the United States, by 9 percent in Japan, and by 27 percent in India. We know this, but being born a girl remains a primary cause for exclusion today. Too many girls are still forced to work, married off, taken from school. The figures are staggering. Only 60 percent of countries have achieved parity in primary education — only 38 percent in secondary. 62 million girls are denied the right to a basic education.

This throws a shadow over all development. We must change this situation – and the good news is we can, by focusing on access, on the quality of education, on the transition to secondary education, on the conditions of learning, on teacher training. These goals guide all UNESCO action in moving forward the 2030 Agenda. This includes encouraging girls and young women to learn science, technology, engineering and mathematics – the sciences have pride of place in the 2030 Agenda.

Sustainability will depend, indeed, on the capacity of Governments to place science and innovation at the heart of national strategies – it is UNESCO’s role to support them at every level, through policy frameworks, through capacity building, through scientific cooperation. This was the reason for the Science Dialogue this morning, at which I pledged UNESCO’s support for the launching of a National Science Centre in Colombo. Sri Lanka is a founding member of the South and Central Asian Man and the Biosphere Network – SACAM – hosting four UNESCO Biosphere Reserves as platforms for biodiversity, conservation and sustainability in action. Science education and education for sustainable development are core parts of our cooperation — building capacity also to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity.

A similar holistic approach guides our work to advance mangrove conservation, through awareness-raising, education and research, community livelihood activities, especially for women. All this seeks to bolster the resilience of societies, to give them every chance to meet goals they set for themselves. This must start with respect for human rights, as the compass direction for all action. I know the importance this message carries in Sri Lanka – this is especially important for reconciliation and dialogue.

In this context, deepening social inclusion and cohesion has never been so important, especially for young people shouldering the heaviest burdens of change, including for migrants and displaced people. This matters at the national level – it matters also at the city and community level, and I know there are five Sri Lankan cities in the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities.

Sustainable Development Goal 16 sets the bar high — to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and

inclusive institutions at all levels.” The rule of law, good governance, democratic practices as you rightfully mentioned – these are essential for healthy society and sustainable development.

I wish to commend the Government for Sri Lanka for its commitment to freedom of expression and the safety of journalists – let me underline the importance of Sri Lanka’s recent Right to Information Act, which provides access to public information to all women and men. UNESCO has worked with Sri Lanka, to support media ethics and self-regulation, to promote gender equality in and through the media, to build capacity to report on poverty, to promote the right to information. I see these as ‘soft power’ drivers for resilience and peace. This is the importance also of promoting cultural heritage and diversity — as enablers and drivers of sustainable development, as platforms for dialogue and reconciliation.

Sri Lanka has eight sites inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List — I had the chance to visit the Ancient City of Polonnaruwa and the Sigiriya Rock Fortress, as well as the Sacred City of Kandy. I know the Archives of the Dutch East India Company are inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. All this testifies to the wealth of this country’s heritage, the rich tapestry of its traditions and beliefs. This heritage has special meaning for the people of Sri Lanka – it carries outstanding universal value for all women and men, as part of the ties that draw humanity together. I am convinced we can deepen our partnership here, to make the most of Sri Lanka’s cultural heritage and diversity, tangible and living – on the world stage, and as forces for reconciliation and dialogue.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe 2015 marked a turning point. Our task now – our responsibility – is to do everything to translate promises into realities. To ensure no one is left behind. To eradicate poverty. To protect the planet. To build more lasting peace. Tackling complex challenges requires determination and cooperation. It requires leadership most of all.

This is the true test of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement – and I wish to thank the Government of Sri Lanka for its leadership, including at UNESCO, where Sri Lanka is a prominent member of the Executive Board – and I wish to recognize here the presence of Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO Mr. Tilak Ranavirjaja. I pledge to you today UNESCO’s absolute commitment to support the Government and people of Sri Lanka, to craft a more peaceful future for all.

Last September, at the United Nations, His Excellency President Sirisena said: Our new vision involves achieving the twin objectives of sustainable development and reconciliation. A fundamental requirement in this context is dealing with the past honestly and building a modern Sri Lankan nation.

You may rest assured UNESCO will walk with you every step of the way.

Thank you.