



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

at the Global Education and Skills Forum - Debate on the Rise of Populism

Dubai, 19 March 2017

Honourable Speaker, Vice Minister Luis Garcia,

Excellency Mr George Papandreou, Former Prime Minister of Greece

Rebecca Winthrop, Director of the Center for Universal Education

Ladies and Gentleman,

In an article from last August on the rise of populism, Ronald F. Inglehart, University of Michigan, and Pippa Norris, Harvard Kennedy School, define populism as expressing “resentment of existing authorities, whether big business, big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich”

On this basis, Inglehart and Norris find that, across Europe, the share of seats gained by populist parties in national and European parliamentary elections has tripled since the 1960s – going from 3.8 per cent to 12.8 per cent.

We see similar trends in other areas of the world.

These are the uncomfortable facts -- the question we are exploring today is what is driving this rise?

There are as many answers to this question as there are political opinions.

Some analysts point to growing inequality and social exclusion.

Others highlight a cultural backlash against long-term, ongoing social change, including globalisation.

The common ground in all arguments is the rise of mistrust and frustration, combined with perceptions of marginalisation and lack of control.

What can we say about education in all this?

It has long been argued that education and politics are linked – for instance, John Dewey, a founder of progressive education, said that education and democracy were interconnected.

This means the reverse must also be true -- the rise of populism cannot be delinked from education ... in this light, one may argue, indeed, the rise of populism reflects a failure of the promise of education.

This being said, let us spin this argument on its head and look to education as an answer to the rise of populism.

I am convinced education must be an essential part of all efforts to tackle rising populism – but not just any education...

We need to transform education for the 21st century, to meet the needs of increasingly turbulent times – when the world has never been so interconnected, nor societies more diverse, but intolerance is on the rise, when the planet faces rising pressure and all societies suffer increasing vulnerabilities.

Today, more than ever, we need global solutions to global challenges – we need a new sense of global solidarity, beyond borders, including all societies.

For this, we need new approaches to education.

I believe the transformation of education today must take two angles – which are embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The first angle is to ensure every girl and boy has access to quality education and that every woman and man has access to quality lifelong learning.

This is essential to widen opportunities for empowerment to all members of society, especially the marginalised.

Genuinely inclusive education is an essential motor for greater innovation and productivity, leading to poverty eradication and overall economic growth.

But access is not enough.

We must also transform the content of education.

Today, education must be more than transmitting information and knowledge. It must be about learning to live in a world under pressure, about new forms of cultural and media literacy, about connecting the dots between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

We need new values and skills for new times – to nurture critical thinking, to give learners tools to make the most of diversity, to develop new behaviours of solidarity to respect the boundaries of the planet.

This is the importance of education for sustainable development, and global citizenship education.

In sum, to respond to rising populism, we need education that both provides relevant skills for the markets of today and tomorrow and education that promotes dialogue and understanding between cultures, that strengthens the resilience of societies and the planet based on new forms of global citizenship.