

Message from Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion to mark the World Philosophy Day at
Makerere University on 17 November 2011

Philosophy, the exercise of critical thought and freedom of expression are vital in the collective search for lasting responses to the challenges of peace and development. This message is central to World Philosophy Day, celebrated by UNESCO since 2002.

In 2011, the extraordinary exuberance of the Arab Spring invites each one of us, whether participants in or spectators of these events, to ponder the meaning of history, social justice, gender equality and fundamental freedoms. Several large-scale disasters – in particular, the earthquake followed by a tsunami and nuclear accident in Fukushima – have emphasized the powerful relevance of questions on the place of humans in nature. All of these events call on us to bolster our efforts to provide everyone, the young and the less young alike, with the means for understanding our rapidly changing societies.

Philosophy is an inexhaustible wellspring of renewal for ideas and societies. This year, the UNESCO Youth Forum once again took stock of young people's thirst for reflective thinking and intellectual innovation. In response, UNESCO wishes to rally the whole human sciences community to what their appetite for philosophy, even among the very young. Initiatives for children's philosophical practice are very promising and offer real opportunities for educational progress. They deserve our full attention.

On 17 November, UNESCO and its partners in many Member States are holding hundreds of symposia, conferences and debates. The International Network of Women Philosophers, founded in 2007 under the auspices of UNESCO, will host its Third Assembly in Paris. The event is one of the main platforms for international exchange enabling women philosophers to play an influential role in contemporary debates.

The practice of philosophy is a process benefitting the whole of society. It helps to build bridges between peoples and cultures and heightens demand for quality education for all. Philosophy encourages respect for cultural diversity, exchanging opinions and sharing the benefits of science, which are the conditions for genuine debate. This 17 November, let us rally together to harness the incredibly transformative potential of philosophy.