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**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO**

on the occasion of the international conference "Urban Change in Iran"

London, 8 November 2012

I am pleased to extend warm greetings to the participants of this International Conference devoted to 'Urban Change in Iran'. I wish to commend the University College of London for undertaking this initiative on a topic of such importance for contemporary Iran and such relevance for cities across the world.

Cities are key actors for peace and development in the century ahead. Our challenge is to ensure that this peace is lasting and this development is sustainable. Half of the world's population today lives in the cities – in one generation, this will rise to two thirds. One billion people today live in urban slums – this will also increase. Cities are our greatest motors of dynamism, growth, innovation and 'living together.' While making the most of our diversity, cities are the world's rising creative hubs. These vibrant centres of innovation open up tremendous new opportunities for employment, learning and exchange. At the same time, cities raise serious questions about injustice and poverty. Urbanization processes are often deregulated and uncontrolled, leading to social and spatial fragmentation, inter-community tensions, a deterioration in the quality of the built and natural environment and increased vulnerability to the impact of climate change. Across the world, cities share common challenges – and yet every city is different, and every solution must be specifically tailored.

Our urban heritage is the result of complex interactions between tangible and intangible components. Together, they constitute a key resource for enhancing the liveability of urban areas and supporting economic development and social cohesion in a changing global environment. Preserving this heritage is one of the major challenges facing all societies today. Tackling this challenge calls for effective planning and management of resources and a clear understanding of the complex social, economic and cultural factors that shape development.

Over the past five decades, urban heritage conservation has emerged worldwide as an important sector of public policy -- in response to the need to preserve shared values and draw full benefit from the legacy of history. However, existing policies and tools need to be revised and adapted to reflect the progressive shift from an emphasis on architectural monuments towards a broader recognition of the interrelated social, cultural and economic processes involved in the conservation of urban values.

UNESCO is working at all these levels. As the specialized UN agency with a mandate to preserve cultural diversity, UNESCO has crafted an integrated approach to safeguarding humanity's heritage. This underlies UNESCO cultural conventions, such as the World Heritage Convention and the Intangible Heritage Convention, which set international standards for heritage protection. The most recent UNESCO instrument is the 2011 *Recommendation of the Historic Urban Landscape*. This Recommendation prescribes a holistic approach to the sustainable development of our historic cities, by taking into account contemporary realities. Conceived as a practical tool for local authorities, this non-binding 'soft' law calls for the direct participation of local communities and private sector in conservation efforts.

Iran has given humanity one of the world's oldest 'urban civilizations'. It possesses a rich cultural heritage that is embodied in 15 sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, several of which have been listed for their urban values -- the Meidan Emam in Esfahan, Sheikh Safi al-din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil, the Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex and the serial property known as the Persian Garden. For UNESCO, these outstanding sites carry vast potential to inspire future sustainable urban development. They enshrine centuries-old social and cultural values that can provide valuable reference points to guide all parties responsible for urban change in Iran today.

In this spirit, I wish you rich and productive deliberations, which will contribute significantly to the global debate on the future of cities.



Irina Bokova