**Speech by Ms. Esther Kuisch Laroche
Director and Representative of the UNESCO Tehran Cluster Office
on the occasion of the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace
Tehran, 17 April 2016**

Excellencies,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

I am very pleased and honored to be with you here today for this celebration of the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. This International Day offers us an opportunity to uphold the essential values of sharing, mutual respect and self-improvement that embody the spirit of sport.

Sometimes people wonder what role sport can play today in building peace and contributing to the development of inclusive societies.

Well, sport brings us together around positive values and makes it possible to promote a culture of dialogue across boundaries. The history of sport has shown its power to break down prejudices, and drive positive social change.

We often refer to the example of South Africa, where a freshly elected President Nelson Mandela used rugby – a sport long associated with white domination and apartheid- as a powerful tool to create social cohesion and national unity and pride.

Sport is a unique vehicle for promoting dignity, social inclusion, gender equality and youth empowerment, with benefits that are felt far beyond the stadiums. Indeed, the values acquired in and through sport – such as fair play, discipline, and team spirit – are invaluable to the whole of society.

It is vital, therefore, to protect sport as a space for education and respect, to safeguard it from the cheating and doping that undermine the sporting ethic and the health of athletes.

We are delighted that the Member States of UNESCO adopted the new International Charter of Physical Education and Sport in November 2015. The revised Charter, in laying down the ethical principles and standards of quality to ensure participation for all in sport, marks a major step towards a fairer, more inclusive and more tolerant sporting environment.

Based on the universal spirit of the original Charter adopted in 1978, and integrating the significant evolutions in the field of sport over the last 37 years, the revised Charter highlights the health benefits of physical activity, the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the protection of children, the role of sport for development and peace, as well as the need to protect the integrity of sport from doping, violence, manipulation and corruption.

The original Charter, which was amended in 1991, was the first rights-based document to state that “the practice of physical education and sport is a fundamental right for all”.

The adoption of the new Charter represents a renewed commitment of the international community to promote sport as a catalyst for peace and development, and to reinforce Quality Physical Education.

And this is very important, because Quality Physical Education is an essential entry point to learning life skills, and developing positive patterns of behavior.

Sustainable development starts with safe, healthy, well-educated children. To impart skills required for the 21st century, education must focus on shaping attitudes, building behaviors and instilling values that support peace, inclusion and equitable development.

This is why UNESCO - as the UN agency mandated for sport, education and peace-building - has joined forces with many partners to promote the recognition of physical education’s broad-based social and development benefits, and to practically support governments by outlining the key steps towards an inclusive policy environment.

Our vision is clear – sport and physical education are essential to youth, to healthy lives, to resilient societies, to the fight against violence. But this does not happen by itself – it takes action by Governments and support from the international community.

The stakes are high. Public investment in physical education is far outweighed by high dividends in health savings and educational objectives. Participation in quality physical education has been shown to instill a positive attitude towards physical activity, to decrease the chances of young people engaging in risk behavior and to impact positively on academic performance, while providing a platform for wider social inclusion.

Yet, despite the recognized power of physical education, we are seeing a global decline in its delivery. This is helping to fuel a global health crisis – conservative estimates consider physical inactivity as accounting for 6 per cent of global mortality.

Therefore, this International Day of Sport for Development and Peace is an important occasion to raise awareness of the importance of sports and to reaffirm our collective commitment towards the provision of quality physical education to young people in Iran and across the world, regardless of their socio-economic situation, ethnicity, culture or gender.

We need to start now, to help young people develop lifelong participation in physical activity, for the benefit of all society.

Therefore, in closing, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Organizers of this important event – in particular the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the National Olympic Academy of Iran, and the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO.

I thank you for your efforts and I would like to reiterate the full support of the UNESCO Tehran Cluster Office to the Islamic Republic of Iran in all its endeavors to promote quality physical education.

Thank you very much.