Statement by Her Excellency Dr. Dipu Moni, MP, Hon’ble Foreign Minister  
Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh at the  
UN General Assembly Thematic Debate on Culture and Development  
United Nations, New York on 12 June 2013

Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished participants,

It is a pleasure to be part of this thematic debate on ‘Culture and Development’. I thank you, Mr. President, for convening this gathering in cooperation with UNESCO.

The question of culture has been integral to Bangladesh’s birth as a nation. Our aspiration to self-determination was inspired by a cultural movement that gradually evolved into a political struggle for autonomy and independence. The Language Movement of 1952 was the first assertion of our right to seek official recognition for our linguistic and cultural identity in the post-colonial state that we became part of. In the early 60s, we even had to resist such cultural apartheids as barring us from performing the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. It is no coincidence that his heart-warming visualization of the ‘Sonar Bangla’, the Golden Bengal, later became an article of faith for our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The supreme sacrifice we had made for the love of our language has been immortalized by UNESCO by declaring the 21st February as the International
Mother Language Day. To solemnize the spirit, our Government has established the International Mother Language Institute where we wish to build an archive of all living languages of the world. We hope that the observance of the International Mother Language Day would soon get the deserving recognition of the UN General Assembly.

Mr. President,

To uphold the legacy of our independence, we have espoused a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural identity as the defining feature of our nationhood. Our commitment to cultural diversity and pluralism is, therefore, a foregone conclusion in our nation building enterprise. The people of Bangladesh use every national festival as an occasion to reaffirm their faith in the sense of unity that binds the closely-knit, pluralistic fabric of the nation.

This harmony in diversity is the essential guiding force of our secular, democratic polity. It is the fountainhead of our inclusive development agenda and all our creative endeavours. It blends perfectly with the syncretic, tolerant and humanistic religious traditions that were nurtured through a culture of peaceful coexistence among our different communities through the ages. The humanity and fraternity that we have seen celebrated in our traditional cultural expressions and heritage are the forces that have strengthened our resilience as a people in the face of recurrent challenges and calamities.
It is, therefore, a central tenet of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s political vision to invest in promoting inter-communal and inter-cultural dialogues at the societal level. We continue to urge our people to guard against those forces that tend to thrive on imaginary or artificial fault-lines between our shared cultural traditions, and on certain regressive values that are our not germane to our indigenous socio-cultural narratives.

Our Government remains on alert to neutralize such polarization within our society by inculcating a modern, scientific outlook and inclusive cultural values, especially among the youth. We remain committed that the creative energy of our people finds the right channels for expression, and that their innovative skills are further honed and realized through our vision to build a knowledge-based ‘Digital Bangladesh’. The creative potentials of our youth in music, fine arts, movies, graphic design or animation are now poised to reach beyond our borders to a larger global audience. We need to ensure that their intellectual and artistic outputs are mainstreamed into the global creative economy by allowing them enhanced access and exposure to the international creative industry. In this context, we reiterate the need for greater space and flexibilities for LDCs in the multilateral trade and intellectual property regimes.

Our Government has also focused on preserving and promoting the distinct cultures of our various ethnic and tribal groups as part of our common cultural heritage. The enactment of the Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act, 2010 and establishment of three such Cultural Institutions are some of the concrete steps taken to that effect. To preserve our tangible and intangible cultural
heritage, we have developed, in cooperation with WIPO, an authoritative repository of our traditional cultural expressions, including those of the small ethnic groups.

We continue to work with other countries to address the issues of access and benefit sharing and prior informed consent for the use of the traditional cultural expressions belonging to the various communities under an international legal framework. Bangladesh hosted an Asia Pacific Ministerial Forum in May last year in pursuance of our adherence to the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

We feel encouraged that these initiatives and others have been recognized through the Cultural Diversity Medal awarded to our Prime Minister by UNESCO in 2012 for her contribution to promoting the use of cultural expressions for peace and development.

Mr. President,

In line with our national policy orientation, we continue to advocate a Culture of Peace and Non-violence in the comity of nations. We wish to continue shepherding the concerned UNGA Resolution that we first tabled in 1998, with ever new dimensions added to it. This commitment is also replicated in our lead contribution as a troops-contributing country to the UN peacekeeping operations. We rejoice the fact that in recognition of the contribution of our peacekeepers, Bangla has been declared an official language in far-off Sierra Leone. We believe
that such bonding forged through diffusion of cultures shall bring our peoples closer to each other.

In a similar vein, we wish to share our experience with post-conflict societies in using community-based cultural activities to heal deep-seated traumas and raise social awareness about issues such as health, hygiene or violence against women. We would, in fact, urge the international community to take a closer look at culture as a tool for maximizing the peace dividends of development in post-conflict settings.

Yet another area of our foreign policy focus has been the promotion of greater cultural awareness and sensitization about the rights of migrant workers and their families. We have seen how cultural insensitivities and xenophobic mindsets can often cloud our judgment about the true potential of migrant workers to act as development agents for both sending and receiving countries. We would suggest that the next High-level Dialogue on Migration and Development further explore the cultural dimension of mainstreaming migration into development.

Mr. President,

The interface between culture and development has generally been taken for granted without much of an in-depth examination into the strengths of this linkage. We are happy that lately some efforts have been made to address this gap. The UN General Assembly has duly emphasized, through its two consecutive Resolutions, the role of culture in promoting sustainable development, social inclusion and poverty alleviation. The Rio Declaration also highlighted the
importance of cultural diversity and the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to sustainable development. There is a growing recognition of the need to give greater focus on culture-based goals and objectives into the post-2015 Development Agenda.

We share the views that there is a need to create a development paradigm that would integrate the principles of cultural diversity and pluralism, a paradigm that would recognize culture as a system of values and as part of the global and local commons. We must work together to promote culture as a bridge to sustainable social, economic and human development and as a pivot to social cohesion, mutual understanding and harmony.

This is also the underlying premise of the “People’s Empowerment and Development” model proposed by our Prime Minister to place people, especially the excluded and disenfranchised, at the centre of our development thinking. The UN General Assembly embraced the model last year as a viable proposition for international peace and development and recommended that it be factored into the MDG review process.

We have also just concluded our national level consultations on the post-2015 Development Agenda where 11 probable goals have been identified along with 62 targets relevant to the international development context. The range of indicators covers issues such as percentage of children from small ethnic groups completing primary education in their mother tongues to the annual budget allocated to promote research, innovations and other creative ventures. We remain open to any constructive suggestions on the possibility of formulating an integrated development goal relating to culture within the overall post-2015 development
framework. We emphasize that culture must be considered to be a cross-cutting issue across the entire spectrum of the sustainable development agenda.

Mr. President,

As we dig into the epistemological roots of the word ‘culture’, we discover that it traditionally maintained a close association with the notions of ‘cultivation’ and ‘civilization’. In its different connotations, culture still implies an all-encompassing, civilizational value system that needs to be nurtured through careful tending. In this light, it may be useful to consider recalibrating our development thinking to unlock and assess the strength of culture as a determining force for sustainable development. The interplay among the various social, economic and environmental factors that is envisaged within the sustainable development framework must be underpinned by a pluralist and inclusive cultural value system. The ultimate objective of this system would be to find a place for every human being on this planet to unleash his or her true potentials in perfect harmony with the surrounding natural environment.

This is a near utopia, perhaps. But, it is within our capacity to approximate this vision. We have already embarked on a journey in that direction. There can be no turning back for us now.

I thank you all.