

**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Day of Mathematics**

14 March 2023

"The measuring rod, the gleaming surveyor's line/the measuring rope, the writing board, which give wisdom/Nisaba lavishly bestowed upon you."

Thus the scribes of Nippur, at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, described the rise of mathematics as a divine gift enabling humanity to live in society.

On this International Day of Mathematics, we are celebrating a universal history, which began in Palaeolithic Africa more than 20,000 years ago.

All the great male mathematicians have contributed to this history, as have the great female mathematicians. This Day is an opportunity to celebrate them, from Hypatia in Greek antiquity to the mathematicians who have won the L'Oréal-UNESCO Prize "For Women in Science", such as Alicia Dickenstein in 2021, and Ingrid Daubechies and Claire Voisin in 2019. Let us also recall the Ukrainian Maryna Viazovska, winner of the 2022 Fields Medal: she is, after Maryam Mirzakhani in 2014, only the second woman mathematician to receive this prize, out of more than 60 mathematicians.

The images of the measuring rod and the surveyor's line also remind us of the concrete effectiveness of mathematics, which is essential to sustainable development. With its many technical applications, it underpins all areas of our lives; and together with algorithms, it lies at the heart of the development of artificial intelligence.

That is why UNESCO, with its educational programmes and through its regional centres in Hanoi and Accra, its Chairs in Benin, Nigeria and Palestine, and the programmes in Asia, Africa and America of the International Centre for Pure and Applied Mathematics in Nice, is committed, on a daily basis, to access to mathematics in developing countries.

And because mathematics is everywhere and is crucial to making informed and effective decisions, we have published a guide, *Mathematics for Action*. It aims to explain to decision-makers how they can use this treasure trove of human intelligence, especially to inform the future.

Modelling can indeed be particularly powerful – the fight against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has shown this – provided that it is used, that its pitfalls and potential are understood, and that entire fields of public action are not allowed to escape democratic discussion. As humanity faces immense challenges, it is crucial that the power of mathematics be both better understood and more balanced.

This Day is all about remembering that mathematics concerns us all, that it writes the world and makes it intelligible. It is a gift of endless generosity: there is still so much to explore.