

Strategic Transformation of UNESCO

National Commissions for renewed multilateralism

The Strategic Transformation process has created high expectations by Member States and National Commissions for substantial positive change of UNESCO in order to upscale impact on the 2030 Agenda. Through this paper, we seek to support moving UNESCO towards a long-term, impact-oriented engagement with its Member States and civil society. We are convinced that National Commissions are a huge asset for UNESCO and multilateralism at large. We are convinced that one of the most effective levers for UNESCO to gain impact is to strengthen its interaction with National Commissions and, through them, with UNESCO networks, as multipliers for UNESCO and its goals. This will allow UNESCO to be a strong and proud “hub and spoke” organisation for a renewed multilateralism, a UN agency of the future, deeply rooted in vital civil society and academia networks across the globe. UNESCO’s key asset is its intersectoral and network character. Let us exploit this huge potential!

National Commissions, as a constitutional part of UNESCO as an intergovernmental organization, need to be fully engaged in the Strategic Transformation, providing their perspective in order for the Strategic Transformation to succeed. They have in-depth experience and comprehensive knowledge of the factors that drive real long-term impact of UNESCO programmes and conventions. National Commissions add enormous value for UNESCO in multiple dimensions, in particular for the presence and visibility of UNESCO in the Member States and for securing the participation of their Member State in UNESCO in a full way. They often coordinate and/or manage the national implementation of UNESCO networks based on conventions and programmes. They make independent conceptual contributions. They directly cooperate at (sub-)regional and interregional level, below the diplomatic level, and therefore strengthen multilateralism, trust and collaboration in line with the objectives of the UNESCO constitution.

In addition to the National Commissions, another unique feature and comparative advantage of UNESCO is its multitude of high-quality and ambitious networks, including designations and designated sites, that are increasingly mobilized and activated. These networks include World Heritage Properties, Intangible Cultural Heritage elements, Memory of the World entries, Biosphere Reserves, Global Geoparks, ASPnet schools, Chairs, Category 2 Centres, UNEVOC Centres, national committees of intergovernmental programmes, Creative Cities, Learning Cities, Sustainable and Inclusive Cities, Clubs and Associations. These networks and their network members are and should become even better multipliers for UNESCO and its objectives, individually and collectively.

While the new Comprehensive Partnership Strategy acknowledges these networks, it does not capture all networks and does not fully capture the central role of National Commissions, in particular in relation to UNESCO networks and programmes. Through these networks, UNESCO can continuously reach out to civil society and academia, build shared narratives with them and engage them in multilateral dialogue. The landmark Independent External Evaluation of UNESCO of 2010 had already made this observation: “There is limited appreciation among Member States or the Secretariat of the potential of this broader UNESCO ‘community’, favouring instead an ‘institutional’ perspective that privileges the formal, top-down, Headquarters-led UNESCO.”

We believe in the potential of UNESCO, together with its National Commissions, to leverage these extensive networks to function as an exemplary “hub and spoke” organization, reaching out to and engaging with local communities in a unique way and then feeding insights and good practice back into the UN system. Thus, UNESCO fosters scalability and leverage, delivering impact, innovation and leadership for the 2030 Agenda, pursuing its overarching goals of human rights, peace, freedom and sustainable development.

¹ This paper is developed in an iterative process, involving, if possible, all National Commissions for UNESCO. The first draft had been formulated in October 2019 by the National Commissions for UNESCO of Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland, specifically addressing pillar 3 of the Strategic Transformation. During the C/4-C/5 consultations of National Commissions in 2020, it will continuously be further developed in an inclusive way. This paper mainly addresses issues that are relevant in the interaction of UNESCO with its National Commissions and other networks. It is an informal contribution of our National Commissions, put forward in the spirit of enriching the reflection towards a successful reform of the Organization. It does not represent views formally endorsed by our governments.

For UNESCO and its National Commissions, it is a combined task to empower, engage and further mobilize these networks and broader civil society; to support their independent contributions to multilateral dialogue; to improve their quality assurance and quality development (criteria, operational guidelines, resilient monitoring and evaluation procedures); to improve national, regional and interregional networking and the ambition of the work of each networks and its members in terms of content. Each network and its members should be understood as partners of UNESCO and its National Commissions in addressing issues such as global citizenship, sustainable development, peace, intercultural dialogue and diversity. Synergies across networks and more intersectoral offers to each network should be identified by the entire Secretariat. Coordination units within the Secretariat should be better staffed and funded; the different coordination units should be better connected across sectors in order to optimize procedures and improve quality. Overcoming any political instrumentalisation of nomination/inscription processes as well as overcoming “competitive self-interest-driven inscriptions” is a high priority across all programmes.

In this context, UNESCO should work hand-in-glove with National Commissions, which should be entrusted more implementation authority, if they have the resources and mandate. There is need for dynamic co-ordination and information sharing between National Commissions, their Member States and UNESCO. Improved cooperation modalities are needed in particular in Member States with Field Offices, since there remain some cases of futile competition between Field Offices and National Commissions for mandate and visibility.

We call on the Director-General to advocate for National Commissions in all high-level interaction with ministers and government officials. We encourage training for Secretariat staff across all sectors, about the role and comparative advantage of National Commissions. UNESCO should also ask its Member States to empower all National Commissions to cooperate at sub-regional, regional and international level, both the National Commissions themselves and the different networks through them.

This leads us to additional recommendations, beyond UNESCO networks. We believe that UNESCO can go a long way in improving its action in a long-term and impact-oriented way. The key task is to overcome silos – silo-thinking between sectors, but also within sectors and within divisions. The key words are: bundling action, scaling-up action and learning from own best practice. We believe that UNESCO benefits greatly from bundling and integrating different forms of intervention, such as policy reviews, institutional capacity building and monitoring and evaluation support, moving beyond one-off interactions. Across the Secretariat, UNESCO requires a more coordinated approach towards national stakeholders.

For the period 2022-2029,

...We see UNESCO having overcome political instrumentalization, speaking up and being heard in the name of human rights, peace, freedom and sustainable development.

...We see UNESCO with a sharpened portfolio of clear-cut and adequately funded programmes, built around the priorities that correspond to the unique features of UNESCO.

...We see UNESCO organized effectively, learning across sectors from experience and working oriented towards long-term impact, scalability and leverage.

...We see UNESCO as a key player and powerful partner within the UN system and in the cooperation with other multilateral actors.

...We see UNESCO communicating clearly and effectively, capturing people’s imagination by telling its story in new ways and linking those stories to global and national priorities.

...We see UNESCO effectively supporting its Member States to implement policies in line with its goals and priorities, in a long-term and coherent perspective.

...We therefore call upon UNESCO to closely interact and coordinate with its networks and above all the National Commissions as multipliers for UNESCO and its goals.

To make UNESCO a strong and proud platform for a renewed multilateralism.

Annex: Additional elaboration of arguments on page 1&2

1. The background

The world is undergoing fundamental changes: urgent transformation needs towards sustainability are not sufficiently well addressed. The political and societal response to the persisting lack of learning opportunities, poverty, inequity and hunger, digital transformation, demographic change, gender inequality and increasing migration as well as global environmental change is not enough. This is demonstrated most strikingly by the youth call to action in response to the climate crisis. The 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) sets out much of what needs to be addressed; its implementation is widely insufficient so far.

All implications of the Covid-19 pandemic cannot yet be fully understood, but what has become obvious already is that the global challenges of inequality and “leaving no one behind” have increased in unprecedented ways.

At the same time, rising nationalism and populism are undermining the achievements of decades of global institution-building, and in particular, multilateral organisations and their agreements. We need more multilateralism today and we need to defend its achievements.

UNESCO is key to the multilateral system; it is a global forum for both governments and civil society to discuss, elaborate and codify ambitious concepts based on shared values and empirical facts. Due to its culture and communication/information mandate, UNESCO is a platform to reach consensus on concepts that are at risk of being “(re-) nationalised” by governments with reference to a distorted form of “cultural diversity”. Due to its education and science mandate, UNESCO underpins such consensus-building with scientific evidence and disseminates it to all societies. Through its convening power and by connecting the different facets of its wide portfolio, UNESCO provides the opportunity for much needed interdisciplinary approaches. Thus, UNESCO is key to negotiate the future of our joint understanding of the “global commons”, “globalization”, “public space”, “public interest”, “human dignity and security” and “participation”, for peace and sustainable development.

As new risks emerge that threaten peace, such as climate change, inequality, pandemics, and challenges to multilateralism, new defences to manage those risks must be constructed. UNESCO with its 193 Member States provides a strong multilateral intergovernmental platform, which is connected to people via National Commissions and UNESCO designations: This institutional solution seems custom-fit for such new defences.

Over the last three decades, UNESCO has standardised its practices in line with other UN specialised agencies. UNESCO is striving to address the requirements of “One UN”, of the 2030 Agenda and the UN system reform. UNESCO indeed makes great efforts to demonstrate impact, effectiveness and efficiency just like any other modern organisation. This led some to believe that UNESCO has lost much of its appeal as a forum for the intellectual, ethical and civil-society based cooperation and dialogue of the world.

In contrast, one of UNESCO’s unique features, beyond its standard-setting and convening power at the highest, strategic level, is its multitude of high-quality and ambitious networks. Through these networks, UNESCO can continuously reach out to civil society and academia, build on their independent contribution and engage them in multilateral dialogue. The 199 National Commissions for UNESCO are the key network nodes connecting UNESCO with its diverse networks.

The 199 National Commissions for UNESCO throughout the world are structured and equipped very differently; they have a wide range of diverging responsibilities and working methods. What they have in common is that they have a decisive role in shaping the impact and visibility of UNESCO in their respective Member State. The relevance of UNESCO is both created through global consensus-building and at country-level. Thus, the impact UNESCO has and the perception UNESCO generates at the level of the societies to whose sustainability and development it intends to contribute in concrete terms, are key elements of UNESCO’s success. National Commissions for UNESCO are key factors for UNESCO’s success.

2. UNESCO's current challenges

a. Defending multilateralism

Multilateralism requires long negotiations, compromises and complex international organizations. It is increasingly challenged by populism and nationalism and their unilateral approaches. UNESCO cannot solve the crisis of multilateralism by itself, but it should demonstrate why multilateralism is also pragmatically the wise choice in the long run. By engaging its various networks and wider civil society structurally, UNESCO can build a new multilateralism model and make a convincing case for multilateralism.

b. Mitigating political instrumentalization

We welcome the successful efforts by the Director-General to mitigate several notorious cases of political instrumentalization of UNESCO programmes and bodies. Addressing all forms of instrumentalization in all programmes and conventions remains a key task for UNESCO's leadership, since they run counter to the goals of the UNESCO constitution. We consider it valuable in this context to recall the provisions of most UNESCO programmes and conventions that foresee the representation of Member States by experts in the decision-making bodies. Expertise and experience from UNESCO networks inform and enrich the intergovernmental dialogue. National Commissions can promote relevant dialogues between government, academia, civil society, and in particular UNESCO networks, both at national and international level.

c. Sharpening the profile

UNESCO has within its portfolio several highly significant and well-respected programmes – and many other activities without sufficiently proven impact. The relevance and quality of programmes does not necessarily depend on extrabudgetary funds raised on their behalf. UNESCO still is active across too wide a spectrum both in terms of sectoral policies and in terms of forms of interventions. Activities are not always well planned, coordinated or communicated and are sometimes too small-scale. The result is a lack of profile, in particular vis-à-vis national policy-making. Thanks to their expertise and networks, National Commissions can identify the future potential of relevant programmes. This would require appropriate formats for the 41C/4 consultation of National Commissions as a global network leading to informed and bold decisions regarding UNESCO's profile.

d. Improving visibility

Visibility cannot be equated with the result of communication, visibility is mostly the result of impact over a long time-frame. UNESCO does not fully identify the impact of its work or replicate its good practices, and does not communicate well enough its true relevance and effectiveness to its political constituencies. Public communication of UNESCO is often insufficiently coordinated with others who might tell its story to others and significantly increase UNESCO's visibility – in particular with National Commissions. UNESCO needs to reach out to National Commissions in order to tell the story of UNESCO in the 2020s in such a collaborative way that it captures the imagination and passions of people, with a limited number of unifying, clear and compelling stories. The new communication strategy, in order to be concerted, structured and impactful, has to foresee appropriate cooperation and support mechanisms with UNESCO networks, in particular National Commissions, in their public relations efforts. For example, if UNESCO were to inform the National Commissions in advance about press activities on certain highlights, the National Commissions could replicate these messages and thus strengthen the visibility of UNESCO in their respective Member States.

e. Responding to a competitive environment

In the last thirty years, Member States, foundations, philanthropists and others have created new formats of cooperation which compete with UNESCO. Foundations, think tanks, NGOs and associations often make use of the concepts and programmes developed by UNESCO and use the room for action only opened up by UNESCO, without referencing UNESCO, and thus weakening the very basis of their action. It is necessary for UNESCO to defend its political leadership vis-à-vis these actors. UNESCO should be on the offensive for its intellectual, human-rights based and ethical leadership in the key areas with a competitive advantage. By activating and engaging its networks, UNESCO will be able to underscore such leadership.

3. Added value – for UNESCO – of the National Commissions for UNESCO

- a. National Commissions *secure the permanent presence and visibility of UNESCO in the Member States*, in the long-term and across programmes, beyond one-off engagement by the UNESCO Secretariat in Paris and Regional Offices. For example, they regularly brief ministers (of several line ministries) and the wider leadership level of ministries, participate in parliamentary committee hearings, inter-ministerial meetings and bodies, and support participatory processes of governments with civil society, etc.
- b. National Commissions secure the presence and visibility of UNESCO and its programmes *at the state, district, municipal and local level*, which UNESCO itself could hardly ever achieve. The same applies to national institutions, umbrella associations, academia, NGOs and civil society in a country, again in a long-term and systematic way, beyond one-off engagement of the Secretariat with selected national institutions or NGOs.
- c. National Commissions *secure the participation of their Member State in UNESCO* in a more comprehensive and long-term way, beyond ad-hoc priorities. One example is ensuring that the Member State submits all due state reports on standard-setting instruments (conventions and recommendations), e.g. by formulating draft reports and conducting national consultations. Another example is ensuring that government representatives and national experts participate in specific UNESCO fora, even if they may not be considered important at that moment. Such participation can in turn lead to a UNESCO programme becoming a national priority.
- d. National Commissions *coordinate and safeguard long-term policy processes*. For example, they initiate and continuously uphold protracted ratification processes of UNESCO conventions, they recall previous government commitments to implement UNESCO recommendations, they often lead the national implementation of the 2030 Education Agenda or ESD-GAP/ESD2030 or GCED, and they promote progressive policies and instruments of UNESCO.
- e. National Commissions *coordinate and/or manage the national implementation of UNESCO networks* based on conventions and programmes (e.g. World Heritage Properties, ICH elements, MoW entries, Biosphere Reserves, Global Geoparks, ASPnet, Chairs, Category 2 Centers, national committees of intergovernmental programmes, Creative Cities, Learning Cities, Sustainable and Inclusive Cities). This includes quality assurance, monitoring the fulfilment of criteria, further differentiating and developing criteria, national and regional networking, inter-network cooperation, and promoting relevant education and research. Thus, they can considerably improve the calibre of programme implementation, which is key to the effectiveness and visibility of UNESCO in the Member States.
- f. National Commissions themselves have high *convening power* and are able to establish consensus between different national governmental, non-governmental and academic stakeholders, thus contributing to a coherent voice of the Member State within UNESCO.
- g. National Commissions *strengthen the visibility of UNESCO in the Member State*. For example, they do this through establishing long-term relations with editorial offices and journalists, through issuing press releases in the local language and targeted to current national discourses, through offering interview partners in the local language, through the translation of UNESCO publications, and dedicated press conferences and events.
- h. National Commissions contribute to a coherent practice regarding the *use of name and logo of UNESCO* across all programmes.
- i. National Commissions *mobilise expertise from the Member State for UNESCO debates*. For a universal organization such as UNESCO, it is of paramount importance that its intellectual and/or policy debates draw upon the widest possible expertise, from as many Member States as possible, and represent the full diversity of an academic and/or policy discourse.
- j. National Commissions offer *independent conceptual contributions* and have initiated substantial debates at UNESCO often leading to programme activities. This expertise is also mobilised through encouraging and supporting ratification of Conventions and membership of Intergovernmental Programmes.
- k. National Commissions directly *strengthen (sub-)regional and interregional cooperation* among Member States, and therefore multilateralism, trust and collaboration in line with the objectives of the UNESCO constitution. This has been the case in many transnational (serial) nominations for

World Heritage, ICH or MoW, in the creation or strengthening of (sub-) regional networks of UNESCO designated sites and through (sub-) regional and interregional networks of National Commissions themselves.

- I. National Commissions support *dialogue with potential donors* of extra-budgetary funds to UNESCO, in particular with line ministries of their government.

In short, activities organized by National Commissions directly build profile and create outstanding visibility and long-term reliable trust for UNESCO at the national level.

4. Strengthening individual networks – non-exhaustive list of examples

- a. *ASPnet*: This global network of UNESCO has enormous potential and an excellent reputation in many Member States. Many Member States and their National Commissions have invested heavily in recent years in improving quality assurance procedures, networking at national level and the ambition of the work of schools in terms of content. Beyond the small, active and committed coordination unit, the Secretariat seems to identify only few synergies with other UNESCO activities. In contrast, UNESCO should identify ASPnet as a key asset across the UNESCO Secretariat. The coordination unit should be empowered to ensure full quality assurance of the network (based on the 2018 guide for national coordinators and the 2019 member guide), stronger coordination of transnational exchange and cooperation, more offers analogous to the 2016-2018 project on the Whole School Approach, and stronger incentives for the networking of schools with UNESCO designated sites in their vicinity, etc.
- b. *World Heritage*: Increasingly, Member States are strengthening the management systems of their World Heritage Site properties in terms of staff, capacity and infrastructure which enables them to fulfil their mandate as “World Heritage actors”. Thus, more and more sites are becoming active partners of UNESCO at the local level, communicating its goals and values to a wide community and strengthening 2030 Agenda related action. They cooperate nationally and internationally. This trend should actively be advanced by UNESCO together with National Commissions. World Heritage properties should also be understood as places fostering community cohesion. Also, there are growing expectations upon UNESCO to take a stance to prevent and counter threats to World Heritage properties. Innovative formats are needed to strengthen credible protection. Another challenge for UNESCO’s credibility is to find solutions for politicized processes of nomination and dealing with State of Conservation reports. In addition, transnational serial and transboundary nominations should be encouraged wherever possible.
- c. *Intangible Cultural Heritage*: As in the case of World Heritage, UNESCO should understand and address the bearer communities of the ICH elements inscribed as partners in promoting goals such as global citizenship, sustainable development, peace, and disaster prevention. In several Member States, National Commissions already pursue this approach. Also, overcoming any political instrumentalization of the inscription processes is a high priority. The Secretariat should work with Member States and National Commissions so that inscriptions are not pursued competitively, but rather through encouraging transnational processes including inventories. Another urgent issue is to limit the commercialization of ICH.
- d. *Memory of the World*: Beyond the current reform efforts, which should i.a. overcome instrumentalization, what has been said above about World Heritage properties and ICH elements also applies to depositories of MoW register entries.
- e. *Biosphere Reserves*: UNESCO Biosphere Reserves should be recognized as an asset across the house. Many of them are already active partners in addressing global issues such as climate change. Through global, regional and national meetings, Biosphere Reserves have significantly improved the use of their potential as active multipliers. Increasingly, National Commissions interact with their Biosphere Reserves in a meaningful way, involving them into all aspects of their work, and fostering national/international networking. Still, further improved formats for regional and interregional networking are needed, as well as for North-South-South twinning partnerships. UNESCO needs to strengthen further the quality assurance of the global network through the consistent transformation of the “Process of Excellence” into a permanent process.
- f. *Global Geoparks*: In the few years since the adoption of the IGGP, Global Geoparks have already successfully positioned themselves as partners of UNESCO. Increasingly, National Commissions

interact with their Global Geoparks, fostering national/international networking in a meaningful way, involving them into all aspects of their work. UNESCO can leverage this approach and further improve IGGP quality assurance and support mechanisms.

- g. Chairs/UNITWIN:* Many Member States and their National Commissions have invested heavily in recent years in improving quality assurance (accreditation) procedures, networking at the national level and the ambition of the work of Chairs in terms of content. Within UNESCO, even stronger quality assurance of the global network and feedback to the Chairs is needed (cp. VINCI recommendations). There should be more concrete and more intersectoral offers by UNESCO to activate the network. UNESCO Chairs foster international academic cooperation and innovation for the 2030 Agenda. Chairs can contribute to breaking the silos between programmes. Finally, Chairs should also be regularly involved by UNESCO when implementing its programmes as has recently been done with the “Futures of Education” consultation.

5. Inter-sectoral recommendations for the Strategic Transformation

It has been emphasized above repeatedly: It is in the interest of UNESCO to better utilize one of its most important unique features: its networks. UNESCO should significantly increase human and financial resources for guidance, quality assurance and quality development of these networks (criteria, operational guidelines, resilient monitoring and evaluation procedures) and for their active management. This concerns all relevant Secretariat entities, most of which have been severely cut in recent years. In this context, UNESCO should work hand-in-hand with National Commissions, which could take over some delegated mandate. The goal is that all network members have meaningful interaction in the respective (and intertwined) networks (at national, regional and interregional level), as entry points for cultural and scientific multilateral diplomacy. All network members should become multipliers for UNESCO and its objectives, individually and collectively.

UNESCO should develop, across programmes, new and overarching procedures to prevent political instrumentalization, to curb the number of nominations in the national self-interest, to foster transboundary and transnational serial nominations and to increase the quality of all procedures.

Member States require UNESCO to plan and implement policy-support processes (e.g. for a new national literacy policy) in a long-term and impact-oriented way. This means that UNESCO should bundle and integrate different forms of intervention, such as policy reviews, institutional capacity building and monitoring and evaluation support, instead of one-off interactions. Across the Secretariat, UNESCO requires a more coordinated approach towards national stakeholders. Such coordination should increase UNESCO’s leverage and also the scalability of its action. Also within the Secretariat, stronger coordination to learn from good practices across different sectors is needed. This applies in particular to the Secretariat’s action on the Sustainable Development Goals, which too often is still sectoral; this includes as well feeding solutions into UN National Voluntary Reporting processes.

We are convinced that UNESCO will benefit from stronger cooperation and coordination with the National Commissions as a constitutional part of UNESCO. This will enable them to emphasise their added value for UNESCO (compare above 3). For this to happen, we encourage training for Secretariat staff as part of their standard induction process and across all sectors about the role and comparative advantage of National Commissions. UNESCO should again call upon Member States to foster their support to their National Commissions, possibly adapt their structure, mandate, composition and functioning to the aims of Art. VII.

UNESCO should also ask its Member States to empower all National Commissions to cooperate at sub-regional, regional and international level, both the National Commissions themselves and the different networks through them.