

Building Peace through Education and Culture: Evolving UN Perspectives ¹

As the United Nations (UN) celebrates its 75th anniversary, one can await a wide range of commentaries on its performance and how it has evolved amidst the turbulence and upheavals of past decades. The greater focus would undoubtedly be on peace and security issues while judging the UN credentials on this historic anniversary. Although equally important on this occasion would be to reflect on the UN's meaningful, yet less traversed role in the field of education and culture, the twin vectors of peace building in the UN system. Indeed, the renewed prioritization of 'preventive diplomacy for peace' by the UN Secretary-General 'to shift from the current trend of spending more time and resources to conflict rather than preventing them' once again highlights the transformative potentials of education and culture to achieve 'sustaining peace' within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals [\[1\]](#).

Admittedly, it is well beyond the scope of this article to offer a compressive review of UN performance in the twin field of education and culture as the long and intertwining UN footprints in this domain are so varied and wide-ranging. Also, there is a massive corpus of relevant UN reports, along with various commentaries and opinions on the subject often reflecting contrary views about the UN's credentials. While some are sceptic or even critical of the UN's role, many studies recognise its unique distinction in steering a genuinely global agenda in the field of education and culture.

This chapter argues that despite complex challenges, the UN has fared well in the realm of education and culture in comparison to many other areas of UN competence. UN agencies have evolved their focus and framework regarding education and culture, continuously responding to the fast-changing societal and technological imperatives. The study brings together some of the significant achievements and directions of the concerned UN entities to emphasise the transformative trends and developments in this field. The attempt is to highlight the remarkable agenda-setting initiatives envisaged by the UN entities in the field of education and culture. The study also reckons with some of the challenges and critical opinions faced by UN entities while implementing the UN agenda in these areas.

Education as Transformation

In the UN system, education is recognised as a vital human right and an essential element for peace and sustainable development. The UN agenda on education has evolved continuously in the past 75 years culminating in the Sustainable Development Goal four (SDG 4) of the Agenda 2030. It requires education to empower people with knowledge, skills and values to live in dignity, build their lives and contribute to societies. While all SDG's are interlinked, the ambition for education embedded in SDG 4 is the prerequisite for achieving the rest of the goals. The successful inclusion of education as a

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standalone goal (SDG 4) in the Agenda 2030 is considered a remarkable achievement for UN agencies like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).[\[2\]](#)

Being the specialised UN agency for education, UNESCO is entrusted with the impartation of a holistic and humanistic vision of worldwide quality education through partnerships, policy guidance, capacity development, monitoring and advocacy. UNESCO acts as a global think tank and a laboratory of ideas in the area of education, leading the international debate on futures of teaching and learning (UNESCO 2020). As a knowledge-based organisation, it provides global and regional leadership in transformative education and strives to strengthen national education systems in collaboration with other UN entities. It has worked as the key agency in implementing various UN programmes, including Education for All (EFA); the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), the United Nation's Literacy Decade (UNLD), and the more recent Global Education First Initiative (GEFI).

During the past decades, UNESCO has evolved its frameworks and programmes to rethink the purpose of education and learning, to meet multipronged challenges unleashed by globalisation. To this end, UNESCO has commissioned an impressive list of reports and papers which provide a global framework of transformative education. Special mention could be made of two landmark UNESCO reports that stimulated transformative currents in education sector worldwide: Learning to Be (1973) or the 'Faure Report' and Learning: The Treasure Within (1996) or the 'Delors Report'.

However, in the wake of globalisation, UNESCO's leading role in setting global educational agenda has been challenged by market-driven forces which have begun to wield considerable influence on education policy worldwide. Reaffirming that education is much more than merely an agent to promote economic growth, the UNESCO initiative on 'Rethinking Education in a Changing World' [\[3\]](#) stressed the need for public policy dialogue to provide a coherent framework to define strategic approaches to international educational development in the 21st century. Another UNESCO publication, 'Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?' [\[4\]](#), calls for new forms of education that could move beyond literacy and numeracy to focus on and new approaches to learning and environment protection for greater justice, social equity and global solidarity. It must be about cultural literacy based on respect and equal dignity that could help in weaving the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The report sets an agenda to the above ends by raising the following questions: How can education better respond to the challenges of achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability? How can a plurality of worldviews be reconciled through a humanistic approach to education?[\[5\]](#).

As a follow-up, the UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative carried out by UNESCO Chairs network is generating global engagement and debate on education, learning and knowledge to inspire the humanity. Entitled as Humanistic Futures of Learning, it draws on the assumption that the complex challenges of today's world require innovative solutions beyond established sectoral approaches and disciplinary boundaries (UNESCO 2020). The World Education Forum (WEF)[\[6\]](#) also reframed the global education agenda, as the international community defined SDGs for 2030. Convened by UNESCO, jointly with UNICEF, UN Women, UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Bank, the WEF invited 1,600 participants, including 120 Ministers of Education, from 160 countries, UN agencies, International

donor agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations. Yet another notable achievement in this direction was the formation of SDG Global Education Forum in July 2019 to deal with the global education crisis and the urgency in accelerating progress towards education-related targets of the Agenda 2030.

Education for Sustaining Peace

The UN and its various agencies have always emphasised the significance of peace education in fostering a culture of peace. UNESCO considers peace education to be of fundamental importance to its mission 'to build defences of peace in the minds of men and women'. Thus, UNESCO and other UN entities have provided precious support to peace educators and peace researchers who promote and disseminate education for peace.

A path-breaking step in this direction was the establishment of the University for Peace (UPEACE) on December 5, 1980, by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 35/55 which accorded this unique institution the status of an international treaty body organisation. After the usual glitches of a new global institution, UPEACE was given a fresh stimulus by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who took many initiatives since early 1999 to reorganise, strengthen and fully internationalise the UPEACE to align it with the peace and security objectives of the UN. UPEACE carries out education, training and research for peace focused on critical issues, including conflict prevention, human security, human rights, environmental security and post-conflict rehabilitation.

The ethos of peace and global citizenship is also closely linked to the concern for quality education. The Delors Report [\[7\]](#), one of the most valuable UN reports on education, famously remarked: 'People need gradually to become world citizens without losing their roots and while continuing to play an active part in the life of their nation and their local community'. It declared "living together" as one of the four pillars of learning for the 21st century, along with learning to know, learning to do and learning to be [\[8\]](#). The report provided a welcome alternative to the dominant utilitarian approaches that dominated education and development discourse in the 1990s. By recognising conflict as intrinsic to human existence, this report highlighted the need for non-violent pedagogies to discover common grounds for peaceful existence.

More recently, the 'International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures' emphasised the need for quality education, grounded primarily in respect for human rights and cultural diversity. 'Global citizenship education' is defined as education that includes the teaching of peace education, human rights education, education for global citizenship and intercultural dialogue, as well as sustainable development education. UNESCO has scaled up its research activities, launching and promoting knowledge networks and research pools to encourage intercultural dialogue, enabling research expertise from diverse regions to share experiential knowledge on cutting-edge issues. GEFI is yet another innovative programme to bolster education as a resource of peace and development. Launched by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in September 2012, GEFI rallies together a broad spectrum of UN entities as well as philanthropic and business institutions, to foster global citizenship through peace, mutual respect and environmental care. GEFI Secretariat in UNESCO provides overall support to the initiative.

The UNICEF is the other notable UN agency which has a global outreach and has launched a range of programmes to inculcate values of respect, tolerance and empathy to foster peaceful relations at home, school, in communities and beyond. The promotion of peace through education is the objective of 'Learning for Peace', a four-year peace building education and advocacy programme implemented by UNICEF in 14 countries in East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and West and Central Africa. Another UNICEF initiative is 'Back to School' campaigns, which have been implemented in Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Gaza, Somalia and Southern Sudan, and have incurred massive peace dividends. UNICEF's Youth, Peacebuilding and Leadership Training, implemented in Guinea and Liberia, has contributed towards reconciliation and reduction of mob violence, violence against women, and has helped in an increased awareness of civic rights and responsibilities.

UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and Security Council Resolution 2354 (PVE-E) offers yet another innovative educational route to countering terrorist narratives [\[9\]](#). UNESCO's activities to prevent violent extremism through education (under PVE-E) focus on awareness-raising and advocacy, the development of guidance, capacity-building for educators and policy-makers and partnerships and projects. Within the framework of Global Citizenship Education, UNESCO is supporting peace pedagogies that prepare youth to resist the appeal of violent extremist messaging and nurture a sense of global belonging and peacefulness in them. UNESCO has also developed two essential normative tools to assist member states – a guide on managing classroom discussions on PVE and radicalisation for the upper primary/lower secondary level, and a guide to help policy-makers prioritise, plan and implement PVE-E actions.

Towards Rapprochement of Cultures

The most noteworthy cultural trajectory for peace has been the notion of 'culture of peace' which stimulated many peace discourses within and outside the UN system. As a concept it is imbedded in the UNESCO's preamble which states that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". In 1997, UNGA characterised the culture of peace as 'respect for human rights, democracy and tolerance, the promotion of development, education for peace, the free flow of information and the wider participation of women'. In recognition of UNESCO's credentials, the UNGA entrusted UNESCO to implement the International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000), International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001–2010) and the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (IDRC) (2013–2022).

The IDRC aims to achieve true rapprochement of cultures nurturing a culture of peace through non-violence and peaceful dialogue. It reaffirms that 'international security and social inclusion cannot be attained sustainably without a commitment to such principles as compassion, conviviality, hospitality, solidarity and brotherhood which are the cornerstones of human coexistence inherent in all faiths and secular ideologies' [\[10\]](#). The sequential transference of culture of peace and allied terms in the UN system is rather instructive to highlight the dynamic evolution of its conceptual, political and programmatic approach. Thus, a range of terms are used to denote UN concerns, including "tolerance" (1995), "culture of peace" (2000), "dialogue among civilisations" (2001), "intercultural and interreligious dialogue" (2007) and more recently "rapprochement of cultures" (2010). The preference

for the French expression 'rapprochement' entailing a greater emphasis on a mutually enriching synergy between cultures is considered as an improvement on similar terms such as 'unity-in-diversity', 'routes of dialogue', 'tolerance', 'culture of peace', 'dialogue among civilisations' and 'intercultural and interreligious dialogue'.

Interreligious Dialogue at UN

Amidst the rising surge of the 'post-secular' international environment', the UN has lately emerged as a pivotal platform to facilitate creative dialogue between religious NGOs (RNGOs), faith-communities and humanitarian-development practitioners [\[11\]](#). Transcending the stereotype image of religion as a conflict generating vector, the UN and other multilateral agencies are now in consultation with faith-based organisations (FBOs) and other religion-inspired actors to achieve SDG's targets. The religious and faith organisations currently maintain relations with various UN agencies, member-state missions and other NGOs, and participate in UN conferences and events.

Although UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's invitation to over 1,000 religious leaders to the Millennium Peace Summit in September 2000 was one of the earliest indicators of such sprouting consensus; the launching of the UNESCO/UNITWIN Network in 2006 on Interreligious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding (IDIU-740) brought together experts and academics committed to interreligious dialogue. In a similar vein, the 61st session of UNGA held in October 2007 convened a High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace (resolution 61/269) and requested the Secretary-General to ensure systematic and organisational follow-up of all interreligious, intercultural and inter-civilisational dialogue and cooperation efforts through the designation of a focal unit in the Secretariat to handle these matters (resolution 61/221).

During the last decade, many UN entities have closely worked with religious and faith-based actors around developmental and humanitarian issues. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been one of the oldest UN agencies to engage with faith-based organisations and actors. Having rich experience in religious outreach since 2007, UNFPA provided foundational lead to the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development (IATF-Religion), which was established in 2010 [\[12\]](#). Interreligious Dialogue programme is also a crucial component of UNESCO's Intercultural Dialogue that aims "to promote dialogue among different religions, spiritual and humanistic traditions in a world where conflicts are increasingly associated with religious belonging" [\[13\]](#).

The IATF has emerged as the prime mechanism to support the UN system in carrying out its agenda around SDG' with sensitivity to, and an appreciation of, the role of religion' (UN 2018). The task force informs and supports UN actors as to the 'why', 'how', 'who', and 'what' of religion, and helps engagement with religious actors around the UN's main areas of work: peace and security, human rights and sustainable development [\[14\]](#). Representing diverse religious traditions, regional and thematic competencies and a gender balance, IATF currently comprising of 22 UN entities have convened and coordinated policy roundtables, workshops, seminars and joint initiatives around religion and religious engagements. Since 2012, the IATF produces an annual overview of the respective member entity activities.

Another UN platform for interreligious dialogue has been the 'Kofi Annan Faith Briefings', a day-long conference held annually on the sidelines of the UN High-Level Political Forums. These Briefings provide a shared platform to UN-FBO consultations and act as the informed engagement to communicate with the governments and civil society. For instance, the Briefings held in 2019 brought together CEOs of interfaith organisations and initiatives with long-standing experience on tackling environmental issues at the global level. The concerted efforts of UN entities to harness peace and development potentials of religious communities are often joined by similar initiatives of regional and local agencies using different terminology and networking trajectories. Thus, the present UN Secretary-General António Guterres has aptly urged religious leaders of all faiths to join the everyday battle to defeat COVID-19 and to renew "our faith in one another" [\[15\]](#).

Media & Information Literacy

Another evolving dimension has been the UN's blended approach towards media, information literacy and intercultural dialogue (MILID). It is a timely response to the complex challenges posed by the unprecedented sway of media and internet technologies. The youth being its primary consumer needs to be made wiser and literate about its use and misuse. Hence, there is a need to generate instructive awareness and knowledge having intercultural competencies, right attitude and understanding for global citizenry. Accordingly, the UNESCO and UN Alliance of Civilisations (UNAOC) have launched a joint programme along with the University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNITWIN) on MILID. This initiative aims to facilitate innovative projects to employ media and information trajectories for promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue. This cooperation has also created a Global Chair on Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (UNESCO-UNAOC MILID UNITWIN). Joined by eight leading universities from across regions, the Chair has been playing a positive role in providing channels of communications between cultures and religions to build peaceful societies and expand civil society participation in strengthening democratic institutions.

Cultural Heritage for Peace

UNESCO in its preamble highlighted the importance of preserving cultural diversities and how "the ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war". Accordingly, UNESCO along with UNAOC and other agencies carried out several campaigns to protect cultural and natural heritage to alleviate direct and indirect violence. As a follow up on the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), and the Istanbul Declaration (2002), the UNESCO adopted a landmark Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage on 17 October 2003 which recognised the invaluable role of the intangible cultural heritage as a factor in bringing human beings closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them. More recently, the UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/2347 (2017) highlighted the role of cultural heritage for peace and security and the role played by UNESCO in protecting cultural heritage and promoting culture as an instrument to bring people together and foster dialogue.

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In response to a sharp increase in the looting and destruction of cultural heritage in conflict and terrorist attacks, illicit trafficking of cultural objects, the UNESCO launched a series of Expert Meetings in 2016 on “Protecting Cultural Heritage – an Imperative for Humanity”. The initiative carried out in close collaboration with International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), stipulated counter measures to protect cultural and archaeological assets and prevent their illicit trafficking for terrorism financing. List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, as well as UNESCO's Histories series of pedagogical publications, including its General History of Africa, played a significant role to facilitate dialogue, overcome prejudice and enhance the idea of diverse but shared histories.

Challenges and Way Ahead

The preceding discussions amply provide evidence of the dynamic and evolving role of UN and its entities in setting a progressive agenda for transformative education and a culture of peace. The close linkages between education and culture offer a unique opportunity to the UN entities to work in many converging areas like intercultural understanding, global citizenship and gender equality, which are the building blocks of peace and sustainable development.

Amidst the achievement of prioritising education as a standalone and crosscutting goal in Agenda 2030, there is brewing discontent over the sluggish progress in achieving UN targets in this area. While the post-MDG decade saw more than 50 million additional children being enrolled in primary schools, currently millions of girls and boys have no access to learning. Widespread illiteracy continues to constrain millions of women and men from finding suitable employment and societal status. According to UNESCO's projections, there will be almost no progress on the number of children out of school by 2030 and learning rates will drop in some countries if current trends continue. Inequalities will also worsen unless the digital divide – the gap between under-connected and highly digitalised countries -- is not rectified.

The faultlines and disparities in implementing SDG 4 have accentuated as the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools, impacting more than 91 per cent of students worldwide, especially those belonging to the most vulnerable and marginalised sections. By April 2020, close to 1.6 billion children and youth were out of school [\[16\]](#). And nearly 369 million children who rely on school meals needed to look for other sources for daily nutrition [\[17\]](#). During COVID-19 evoked disruptions, many UN agencies and entities are actively supporting national governments to facilitate inclusive learning opportunities for children and youth. For instance, in March 2020, UNESCO launched the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition, partnering with its stakeholders to design and deploy innovative solutions. UNICEF is also supporting governments and education partners in 145 low and middle-income countries to develop alternative learning programmes and mental health support.

Similarly, there are dissenting opinions in the allied field of culture, which interrogate 'culture of peace' from a pluralistic vision of 'culture(s) of peace' drawing on the diverse interpretations of the two key elements "culture" and "peace'. However, this controversy looks meaningless in light of UNESCO's emphasis that "local programmes are embedded in a national and perhaps sub-regional context, as well as the global context of the United Nations and its specialised agencies". Some others criticise UNESCO ideology of culture for generating relativism and chauvinism instead of following the universalist legacy of enlightenment spirit [18]. There are also intellectual discords around the conceptualisations of intercultural education [19].

Despite UNESCO being a non-political organisation, it has to deal with the political polarisation of the day. On many occasions, it faced the brunt of politically disaffected members who preferred to withdraw from UNESCO for political reasons. The US first withdrew from UNESCO during the Cold War in 1984 over the organisation's alleged pro-Soviet leanings. The UK and Singapore followed the US lead to leave in the late 1980s, though all these dissenting countries eventually re-joined UNESCO. While South Africa withdrew from UNESCO in 1955 in protest of its anti-apartheid policies, Japan did so over the inclusion of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre in UNESCO's "Memory of the World" programme. Once again, in 2011, the US slashed its funding to UNESCO after it admitted Palestine as a full-time member. Its budget in 2017 came down to almost half of what it was in 2012 critically eroding UNESCO's worldwide commitments.

Like in other areas of its competence, the UN performance in the twin fields of education and culture has always been influenced by the shifting attitude of the international community. After all, UN working is mostly a reflection of how the member states work together to achieve global targets. Unsurprisingly, there is widespread discontent both within and outside the UN system that not enough is being done by the national governments to further UN agenda. But despite the political and financial constraints, the UN entities concerned with education and culture have done quite well to carry out their mandated responsibilities. Endowed with a "soft power" mandate, UNESCO and many other UN entities have responded well to explore innovative pathways of peace education, intercultural dialogue, heritage, media and ICT to foster a global spirit of solidarity and rapprochement – all so vital to accomplishing the Agenda 2030 and the emerging notion of sustaining peace, as its corollary.

Endnotes:

[1] UNESCO, Long Walk of Peace: Towards a Culture of Prevention, UNESCO, Paris, 2018, pp. 23- 25.

[2] Qian Tang, 'Goal 4- Education in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda,' United Nations Chronicle, LI (4), 2015, pp. 11-12.

[3] UNESCO, Rethinking Education in a Changing World, UNESCO, Paris, 2013, pp. 41-42.

[4] UNESCO, Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good? UNESCO, Paris, 2015, pp. 35-54

[5] Ibid, pp. 9-12.

[6] UNESCO, World Education Forum Report, UNESCO, Paris, 2015, pp. 9- 29.

[7] UNESCO, Revisiting Learning: The Treasure Within - assessing the influence of the 1996 Delors Report, UNESCO, Paris, 2014, pp. 81-82.

[8] Ibid, pp. 1-28.

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[10] UNESCO, Agree to Differ, UNESCO, Paris, 2015, pp. 46-49.

[11] Verena Bettinger-Lee, "Blessing or Bother? Religion and Religious NGOs at the UN in New York", in Jeremy Carrette and Hugh Miall (eds.), Religion, NGOs and the United Nations, Bloomsbury, New York, 2018, pp. 122- 127.

[12] UN Interagency Task Force, Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development, Annual Report, United Nations, New York, 2018, pp. 6-11.

[13] See UNESCO's Interreligious Dialogue Programme at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/dialogue/intercultural-dialogue/interreligious-dialogue/>

[14] Azza Karam, "Attitude of United Nations has changed toward faith-based organisations in recent years, says UN adviser" June 13, 2019, at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/attitude-of-united-nations-has-changed-toward-faith-based-organizations-in-recent-years-says-un-adviser>

[15] United Nations, Press Release, Secretary-General, Statements and Messages SG/SM/20042, April 11, 2020. See <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20042.doc.htm>

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[17] UNESCO, Education: From Disruption to Recovery, UNESCO, Paris, May 2020, pp.6-10.

[18] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Between Universalism and Relativism: A Critique of the UNESCO Concepts of Culture" in Jane Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour and Richard Wilson, (eds.) *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 127-48.

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