

Message from the Chair of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO

UNESCO: Our Role in the Post-COVID Era

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UNESCO and COVID-19

COVID-19 has been an unpredictable and deeply destabilizing crisis. It has shaken the international order, widening economic disparities and forcing a transition from globalism to unilateralism. Widespread economic depression and mass unemployment have created sharp fractures in our social and economic structures, and the pandemic's effects on education - schools closing, classes moving online, more people leaving education due to financial difficulties - will be felt for many more decades to come.

Yet there has also been progress. The pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, and ICT is giving us more ways to conduct essential social and economic activities. Such transformations may have great qualitative impacts on education systems in the long term.

So what kind of future awaits us beyond the pandemic? Human society is entering an era where infectious diseases, natural disasters, economic crises and other calamities will occur with increasing frequency, threatening the sustainability of development and growth. How can we overcome these challenges and achieve a “well-being that leaves no one behind”?

To survive in a “post-COVID” world we must overcome physical distances, eliminate ignorance and prejudice, better understand one another, and pursue solidarity and cooperation. These goals are especially important for today's youth, who will ultimately be responsible for tomorrow's society. It is here that UNESCO can help the world achieve “human security”, ensuring that each and every individual can live with peace of mind.

Now more than ever, we should reaffirm UNESCO's mission: to build peace in the minds of people, to promote the common welfare of humankind, and to build a sustainable society. UNESCO must envision an ideal future and build the connections necessary to achieve this, integrating perspectives from education, science, culture, information and communication.

UNESCO is currently assessing the state of education across the world, calling on Member States' education ministers to hold high-level meetings and share information on policies and good practices. In collaboration with other international organizations UNESCO has helped create the "framework for reopening schools", and propose a Global Education Coalition involving the private sector and ICT. UNESCO has also shown its strong support for science and culture, encouraging international cooperation in open science.

Above all UNESCO is an international organization, and its approach to this unprecedented crisis should be international. We should undertake all necessary reforms to ensure greater friendship and mutual understanding among our Member States, which in turn will make our joint crisis response more flexible and effective.

Our Next Steps

UNESCO was the first international organization Japan joined following the devastation of the Second World War. Indeed, entering UNESCO was the start of Japan's full-scale reintegration into the international community. Our objective to "enhance international peace and the common welfare of humankind" was, and is, the hope of all Japanese people. As such Japan has been steadily expanding its UNESCO activities at home and abroad.

Following Japan's joining of UNESCO it experienced a period of high economic growth, and was in a position to support developing countries by proactively contributing to UNESCO's "Education for All". In addition, Japan led the fostering of creators of a sustainable society by advocating the "Decade of Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD) at the Johannesburg Summit (World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002).

This year will mark the 70th anniversary of Japan joining UNESCO. This milestone year is also the start of the United Nation's "Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development" and the scheduled kick-off meeting for "ESD for 2030". In order to advance UNESCO-related activities in this new era, and to realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Japan must use this 70th anniversary opportunity to make real progress. After all, Japan is no stranger to overcoming crises - it has continued developing through serious natural disasters such as the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, and we now intend to hold the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games as proof that humankind has overcome COVID-19. Japan needs to demonstrate its leadership and contribute to UNESCO's role in reconnecting the world, by setting a positive direction for the post-COVID era.

Japan should contribute to UNESCO's mission by taking advantage of its track record of disaster recovery and sustainability science. Then, leveraging its knowledge and strengths and effectively utilizing Funds-in-Trust, public and private stakeholders should act together to help UNESCO promote its reforms and steadily implement activities in the fields of education, science, culture, communication and information, towards the realization of the SDGs. For example, Japan should be actively involved in various UNESCO-led initiatives set in motion by COVID-19 such as the Global Education Coalition.

Furthermore, the 70th anniversary of our joining UNESCO is an opportunity to disseminate information to various stakeholders and encourage their participation. Based on the proposal of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO last October, we will focus on strengthening our network of young people who can provide crucial support in the post-COVID era. We will proactively work with diverse groups to advance initiatives such as the promotion of ESD, promotion of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science, regional revitalization and the building of a multicultural society that benefits from UNESCO's activities, as well as the creation of strategic platforms to deepen collaboration among our variety of stakeholders.

In closing, I would like to quote a passage from the UNESCO Constitution: "The wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern." I hope these words can renew the determination of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO to fulfill our sacred duty.