

Youth Action for Promoting UNESCO Activities

Proposal

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Youth Committee of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO

Introduction

This document proposes UNESCO activities that youth in their teens and twenties around the world can take part in willingly and continuously to invigorate UNESCO activities. It has been compiled by members of the Youth Committee of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO set up under the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO (JNCU) on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Japan's UNESCO membership.

Japan joined UNESCO in 1951, during its post-WWII reconstruction and recovery, taking its first step toward rejoining the international community and marking the start of UNESCO activities in the country. It was carried out by citizens who supported the concept of promoting international peace and of the common welfare of mankind through educational, scientific, and cultural relations of the peoples of the world. The 70-year history of UNESCO activities in Japan, uninterruptedly handed down from one generation to another, inspires us to strengthen our resolve as members of the future generation to play active roles in driving UNESCO activities for a sustainable future.

The world today faces complex and unclear prospects due to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and rising international tensions. The recent aggression of Ukraine by Russia freshly demonstrated how difficult it still is for the international community to build peace. Meanwhile, growing disparity and division continue to exacerbate the seriousness of numerous other issues calling for united global efforts, such as disparity in education, global environmental problems, human rights issues, poverty, issues related to food and oceans, as well as inclusivity and the protection of gender and other forms of diversity.

Current affairs are challenging us to preserve and reconstruct person to person connections. The COVID-19 pandemic took away the opportunity of meeting people from different countries face to face to interact and directly experience different values and cultures. It took away from education the in-person learning opportunities often leading to a more in-depth understanding of subjects, and discussions for envisioning a future. On a positive note, the pandemic has driven the utilization of information and communications technology, offering more ways for people to gather at any time and in any place. It cannot be denied, however, that heart-to-heart connections have grown weaker.

Current affairs are making us freshly and acutely aware of the importance of UNESCO and its activities designed to develop mutual understanding and solidarity of the international community through dialogue under the idea expressed in the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."

In its recently decided medium-term strategy for 2022 to 2029, UNESCO mentions youth as a priority group for goal attainment. Efforts to build a peaceful and sustainable world would most certainly gain significant momentum if those of us tasked with the future of this world can take global issues to heart, and willingly and proactively take actions.

We wish to take the first step by executing the following action plans in partnership with youth around the world, UNESCO Headquarters, and the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO.

The strengths of UNESCO activities from the viewpoint of youth

The strengths of UNESCO activities are open to youth and other members of the general public from all walks of life and with diverse perspectives, regardless of differences in country or region, language, culture, location, or age, allowing everyone to unite under the common idea of “Building peace in the minds of men and women,” also we think that UNESCO activities allow grassroots participation to take ownership of culture, education, natural sciences, and other areas that directly affect everyday living. Additionally, a significant advantage of UNESCO activities is their capacity to encourage individuals to develop interests in and take ownership of their country’s culture and affairs, thereby driving collaboration on a global scale.

Proposals

1. Workshops for intercultural dialogues

Background and issues

A strength of UNESCO activities in Japan is the presence of nationwide activity bases rooted in local culture and society. In order to further drive UNESCO activities going forward, government and private sector cooperation is essential, and we believe this awareness is also shared by educational practitioners. The Implementation Plan for Education for Sustainable Development in Japan (The Second ESD Implementation Plan) acknowledges the importance of diverse stakeholder involvement, and mentions youth empowerment, promotion of youth participation, and community-level activity promotion as future focus areas.

However, intercultural dialogues open to wide participation are not yet common enough in Japan, where existing activities for cultural dialogue and international exchange tend to be limited to school activities carried out by a limited portion of staff members and students.

We also feel that current Japanese education does not encourage openness toward dialogue and diversity because it offers little opportunity for students to form their individual opinions and interact and discuss with others who have different opinions. Efforts to develop dialogue, discussion, and original thinking cannot be found in ESD either.

For this reason, an important future step would be to reduce the disparity of opportunity by utilizing and strengthening wide-ranging networks of activity groups, and by encouraging cultural dialogue and international exchange programmes under ESD.

Action plan

○ Workshops for Intercultural Dialogues Geared Towards University Students

Training workshops for learning and improving dialogue approaches and methods will be conducted. The workshops will be conducted under ESD and will be open to youth who are responsible for the future.

Under the initiative of youth coordination conducted by the Youth Committee of JNCU, the workshops will be conducted with the cooperation of private-sector bodies in Japan, international UNESCO-related organizations, and experts. Workshop contents will include critical thinking

frameworks such as Futures Literacy and Conflict Resolution, which are considered essential for resolving disputes and issues of global scale.

Initially, the workshops will be conducted in partnership with universities, and contents will be developed based on the existing activities already conducted at universities under ESD. In the long term, the workshops could be offered to other age groups, and expand their reach through publishing resources online. At this stage, workshop contents will be tailored to different age groups in order to offer levels of knowledge and skills best suited for the capacity of participants. Moreover, follow-up events would be held for the participants of the workshop; idea competitions about local UNESCO related projects with the possibility of grants awarded to winners to implement the ideas, and conferences where youth from around the world can discuss global issues.

The workshops will offer youth not just opportunities for dialogue and international exchange, but also the chance to build international networks. In the process of organizing the workshops, it is also possible to strengthen the cooperation between Japanese UNESCO activities, related organizations in Japan and abroad, and individuals involved.

Expected benefits

The workshops can help form sustainable communities and inclusive civil societies where dialogue and diversity are respected. The workshops will also help participants understand SDGs and other global goals in the context of their own communities, and thereby take ownership of these goals. In the long term, the workshops can strengthen mutual understanding and friendship among members of the younger generation, contributing to stronger, more stable long-term cordial relationships between Japan and other countries. The processes of developing the workshops and other programmes can also strengthen the cooperation between private-sector NGOs and UNESCO-related organizations.

2. Active youth involvement in Biosphere Reserves and UNESCO Global Geoparks

Background and issues

○ Low youth awareness of nature-related UNESCO designation programmes

Human society co-existing with nature has become the most urgent global issue in recent years for sustainable development. However, compared to cultural designation programs (i.e. World heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage programmes), nature-related designation programmes by UNESCO, namely Biosphere Reserves (BRs) and UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGGps) have trailed in their recognition and popularity. To fully utilize the untapped potential of nature-related UNESCO designation programmes, we must explore ways to involve young generations in the publicity of these programmes and in the utilization of designated sites.

○ Youth-led community revitalization for BRs and UGGps designated areas

BRs and UGGps sites are seldom world-famous destinations. Unlike urban areas, they also tend to have low youth population and involvement. Willing youth locally as well as from other areas of

the country can contribute to the development of designation programmes and remedy any lack of human resources in these communities by working with respective local governments.

○ **Utilization of BRs and UGGps to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**

Progressive depopulation and the accompanying disappearance of hamlets and villages are recognized as urgent problems, especially in rural parts of the country where sustainable societies can only be built with the participation of the young generation from within and outside the local area. Nature education programmes run by BRs and UGGps locations can potentially benefit from active youth participation. Through their involvement, youth can learn about local issues on the ground, examine the relationship between local and international issues, and importantly, act in partnership with community members to improve human harmony with nature and build a sustainable society.

Action plan

(1) Appointment of Youth Ambassadors for BRs and UGGps

U30 people with “reach” in and surround area of designated site will be appointed to serve as Youth Ambassadors for their BRs or UGGps, and will actively promote the appeal of the site and local area using social media platforms and events. Also, using the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities portal site (described in a later section), youth-ambassadors will act as mediators who will help to match students who are motivated to engage in UNESCO activities, with BRs/UGGps wishing to attract or recruit youth.

Expected benefits

- Ambassador activities can offer youth from within and outside the local area extensive learning opportunities about each BR/UGGps locality, its culture, and industry, which would help the ambassadors, as well as their audience, build greater connections with the local area. Ultimately, this program can encourage more local youth to maintain ties with their hometown after leaving for university study or employment.
- Enlisting the talent of youth with good social media skills can lead to effective communication of the appeal and scientific features of BRs and UGGps. Hashtags can be employed, for instance, to freshly spotlight BRs and UGGps in relation to each other, and roll out joint or coordinated promotions.
- Students wishing to join UNESCO fieldwork with other youth already working at BRs/UGGps can choose from richly varied sites according to the type of work they wish to do. BRs/UGGps wishing to attract youth can do so more effectively and with less burden.

(2) Encouragement of scientific fieldwork at BRs and UGGps by youth

BRs and UGGps have great appeal as destinations where youth can carry out scientific research. Such youth activities are welcomed also by local governments and residents from the point of gaining possible future community members. However, these two parties currently seem to have little interaction. Action is therefore necessary to identify and draw attention to such demand and supply, and to drive the planning, operation and execution of youth fieldwork at BRs and UGGps. Research findings made by youth fieldwork will be communicated widely to encourage the utilization of local assets, and opportunities for discussing the findings will be created. Members of the Youth

Committee of JNCU with past experiences of research work and in-depth learning at BRs and UGGps will widely share their experiences.

Expected benefits

- Research at BRs and UGGps can offer exposure to values and circular lifestyles that youth do not experience at home, helping them recognize the significance of nature and culture. Acceptance by the host community can contribute positively to the personal value development of youth through the moral support and sense of belonging it can offer.
- BRs and UGGps locations can potentially address any labor shortage by accepting youth for fieldwork and research in their areas of choice.
- Over time, active and successful examples of collaboration achieved by this programme can be rolled out to other BRs and UGGps, potentially contributing to problem-solving and sustained development across BRs and UGGps.
- Opportunities of presenting the findings of BRs and UGGps research/fieldwork can encourage diverse stakeholder collaboration towards BRs and UGGps development. This is achieved by the program operator youths serving as “communicators” that mediate between the young researchers and the local residents to create opportunities for the two parties to discuss ways of rediscovering and utilizing local assets.

3. Active youth participation in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network programme

Background and issues

UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) was created in 2004 to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. Today it has grown into a large network of nearly 300 cities around the world, including ten of them in Japan. UCCN not only promotes the sustained development of culture and arts in designated cities, but also plays a role in deepening international and inter-regional cross-cultural exchange and dialogue.

However, UCCN has had limited success in encouraging the participation of the citizen (especially the youth) in culture and the arts, due in part to low recognition by the citizen, insufficient collaborations with other UNESCO programmes, and insufficient interaction between UCCs in Japan. The pandemic of COVID-19 causes significantly impacted the culture and arts sector, reducing opportunities for youth to appreciate and take part in cultural activities.

Leveraging the creativity and imagination of younger generations is nonetheless essential for growth of the culture and arts for the building of cities with greater diversity and prospered. For this reason, the younger generation must actively seek to contribute to the sustained preservation of cultural diversity, as well as local revitalization and cross-cultural dialogue based on it. Ways of doing so include youth participation in programmes run by the government and other bodies, and participation in the planning of such programmes as well as in UCCN-related activities.

Action plan

(1) Encouragement of collaboration between UCCN and other UNESCO programmes, such as UNESCO Associated Schools Network

This action involves strengthening UCCN collaboration with UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet)—a UNESCO programme highly relevant to the younger generation—to gain synergistic effects for both, improve UCCN recognition, and promote youth participation in UCCN.

In order to achieve this, the Youth Committee of JNCU will collect cases of UCCN activities inside and outside of Japan that successfully utilized for the practice of ESD and in-depth learning at ASPnet schools, and share them on the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities and other mediums.

(2) Hosting of a UCCN Youth Summit (tentative name) open to youth participation

Under the initiative of the Youth Committee of JNCU, an international conference for discussing UCCs will be held for the participation of youth. This event, tentatively named the UCCN Youth Summit, will aim to strengthen international collaborations among youth activities by sharing cases of trailblazing activities conducted by youth in UCCs.

Some UCCs in Japan already conduct UCCN programmes involving youth initiatives and participation.¹ There is also a high school UCCN summit held as a one-off event by students at Yamagata Prefectural Yamagata East Senior High School. These cases will be studied when designing the proposed youth summit. Moreover, we will explore further development of UCCN through involving active youth in cities, that are currently attempting to be a member of UCCN, in this summit.

Expected benefits

In order to spread and expand the initiatives by youth, we will utilize UCCN—one of UNESCO's frameworks where cities take center stage—, promote collaboration with other UNESCO programmes, and provide a place for summits where youth from all over Japan and abroad can gather. Youth participants can learn about the wide-ranging strengths and approaches of the UCCN programme, improve mutual understanding between other cities, and more fully understand their own hometowns. In addition, the opportunity for discussion and exchange with youth from other cities will motivate them to participate in Creative Cities projects and create new possibilities for collaboration among cities.

¹ 1Yamagata City, Yamagata Prefecture (film field, designated in 2017): Proactive participation of high school students in the "Yamagata Film Package to the world Project" a Creative City promotion project in Yamagata City. (<https://www.creative-yamagata.jp/archives/395>) Asahikawa City, Hokkaido (design field, to join in 2019): High school students deepened their learning about SDGs and design based on the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, and presented their learning at the "Machinaka Campus" in the citizen participation section of the Asahikawa Design Week 2021. (<https://sites.google.com/view/machinakacampus/>) etc.

4. Youth participation in the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities

Background and issues

Members of the young generation today have little interest in specific UNESCO activities and content. Chances of having anything to do with a UNESCO Association are hard to come by, even for the limited few who are actually interested. Youth awareness of the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities * is likewise limited, making it hard for the platform to be described as sufficiently being utilized by youth for the execution of UNESCO activities.

To encourage UNESCO activities by youth, places where they can discuss issues between themselves need to be provided, as well as opportunities for them to carry out activities by connecting with a greater number of UNESCO-related bodies.

Another obstacle is that opportunities for youth from different areas of the country to meet are being reduced by the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictive effect on face-to-face events. To increase UNESCO activities by the youth across the board, networks must be built to allow youth scattered across the country to interact and collaborate with each other. Also needed are strategic publicizing of youth activities, as well as collaboration with JNCU and collaboration with other countries.

*UNESCO Future Co-Creation Platform: A platform aiming to drive, in an integrated manner, the horizontal connection between UNESCO activities across different areas, diverse stakeholder collaboration toward youth empowerment and the attainment of the SDGs, strategic national and international communication of activity achievements, and overseas deployment of pioneering UNESCO activities.

Action plan

(1) Creation and sharing of lists of UNESCO-related youth organizations and organizations open to youth involvement

Lists will be compiled of UNESCO-related organizations operated mainly by youths, of organization potentially collaborating with UNESCO, and of organizations that are actively engaged in UNESCO activities and willing to be in contact with youths. These will be shared on the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities, thereby increasing website traffic, and encouraging youth participation in UNESCO activities by offering youth better access to information about UNESCO-related organizations.

(2) Creation of a dedicated Youth Page (tentative name) on the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities

A page devoted to young users—tentatively named “Youth Page”—will be created on the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities website. The page will be a content-rich, one-stop repository of information relevant to youth, designed for youth to employ their own perspectives in publicizing and disseminating information about UNESCO activities they are involved in.

At the same time, social media platforms will be actively utilized to promote recognition of UNESCO activities operated youth and the Youth Page. Over the medium term, publicity activities will be carried out with the aim of realizing tie-ups with existing organizations run mainly by youth.

The Youth Page will include a Youth Q&A Room, where the Youth Committee of JNCU will directly communicate with and handle questions from fellow youths. The Youth Q&A Room will be a counterpart to the existing *Kyodo no madoguchi* (*lit. collaboration window*)² which serves organizations rather than private users. It is expected that direct communication with similarly aged people will make it less daunting for young private users to make contact, and encourage broader participation in UNESCO activities.

(3) Hosting of a Next-Generation UNESCO Youth Forum

An annual Next-Generation UNESCO Youth Forum (Youth Forum) will be organized to encourage UNESCO activities by younger generations. The goals of the Youth Forum are to facilitate collaborations between youth-led UNESCO-related activities in the country, expand Japanese UNESCO activities with active youth involvement, and raise awareness of UNESCO by youth who are not involving UNESCO activities.

The initial stages of Youth Forum planning and operation will be conducted by the twenty-member FY2021 Youth Committee of JNCU in partnership with the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities. Further personnel will be recruited if and when more functions are required. Member composition will take into consideration gender balance, as well as diversity of age, occupation and affiliation. In implementing the activities, these shall also be carried out in cooperation with the youth who are working on in existing UNESCO-related organizations, and who engage in activities being compatible with UNESCO.

Roadmap for youth participation in the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities

Near term: First and second years

- Create a Youth Page (tentative name) on the Platform for Future Co-Creation of UNESCO activities website. Commence publicity using social media.
- List and compile information pertaining to youth-run UNESCO-related organizations in Japan.
- List organizations willing to be in contact with youth.

Medium term: Second and third years

- Identify and approach youth-led activities for possible collaboration with UNESCO.
- Partner with existing organizations to conduct PR activities targeting youths.
- Hold a Youth Forum, a UNESCO-related event open to youths in Japan.

Long term: Third, fourth, and fifth years

- Request that UNESCO-related organizations in Japan create a youth department, or select a youth representative.
- Hold a Global Youth Forum, a UNESCO-related international event open to youths around the world.

² <https://unesco-sdgs.mext.go.jp/collaboration> (Japanese only)

Expected benefits

- Easier access to relevant organizations can encourage autonomous youth participation, and expand diversity and scale of youth communities participating in UNESCO activities.
- Learning about the activities and efforts of fellow youths can motivate youths to take action, and encourage them to take on challenges for UNESCO activities.
- Familiarizing youths with the cycle of taking ownership of an issue and taking action to address it can offer them ongoing practical ESD.
- UNESCO activities by youths can become more visible, leading to greater interaction and collaboration between programmes with similar goals, and greater issue-solving success.
- Over the long term, public awareness of ESD and UNESCO activities can improve, potentially leading to the realization of greater human capacity for serving a sustainable society.

Postscript

Ever since experiencing the division, disparity, and shifts in lifestyles and values caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we as individual global citizens and members of the Youth Committee of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO have had numerous discussions that earnestly address the idea of “Building peace in the minds of men and women.”

Spending time learning and discussing with other youths the importance and depth of UNESCO activities truly drove home the significance of roles played by the natural sciences, culture and education in building “rich human minds,” which in turn shape a peaceful and sustainable society.

During these discussions, people aged similar to us often remarked that UNESCO does not feature large in their consciousness, nor feel familiar—they know the name, associate it with World Heritage sites, but only have fragmentary or superficial knowledge about its activities.

However, this does not mean no UNESCO-related activity has found currency among youth. SDGs- and ESD-related activities by various organizations, especially those involving youth, have become quite common here in Japan as in many other countries. It should be emphasized that many activities do exist that conform to UNESCO ideals and goals, even if they do not carry the UNESCO banner. To encourage UNESCO activities going forward, we urgently need to create and promote mechanisms for encouraging organizers of unrecognized UNESCO-relevant activities to use UNESCO platforms for their activities, leveraging the versatility of UNESCO activities.

We are resolved to encourage UNESCO activities through wide youth participation, and pledge to realize a sustainable society under the new normal by executing the proposed action plans in a responsible manner; by proactively practicing community revitalization, inclusivity, dialogue, and learning; and by actively embracing new values—thereby contributing to the development of a peaceful future society.

In closing we would like to thank all the members of JNCU, the staff members of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan as well as UNESCO-related organizations for giving an opportunity to make a proposal as a member of Youth Committee of JNCU and providing access to reference materials, advice, and other forms of generous support.