

Revitalization of UNESCO Activities in Japan (proposal)

Japanese National Commission for UNESCO (JNCU) has compiled a proposal on the policy for UNESCO's activities in Japan from a mid- and long-term perspective following the deliberations at the 145th Executive Meeting of the JNCU on September 12, 2019. This proposal and its recommendations aim to further activate UNESCO-related activities in Japan in order that Japan, a leading solution provider, to play a proactive role for the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the international society, where globalization and technological innovation are also rapidly advancing.

The following is the proposal submitted to the Minister for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

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Japanese National Commission for UNESCO

October 18, 2019

UNESCO-related activities in Japan began as voluntary private-sector cooperative activities before Japan joined UNESCO in 1951. After the world's first UNESCO Association was formed in Sendai, private-sector UNESCO-related activities quickly spread throughout Japan. In 1949, the year UNESCO set up an office in Japan, UNESCO-related activities showed the big upsurge in every area in Japan; the Upper and the Lower Houses of the Diet adopted a "Resolution on the UNESCO Movement," and the division in charge of UNESCO-related activities was established under the Minister's Secretariat of the Ministry of Education. These movement, promoted by both public and private sectors, realized Japan's first membership for the international organization, membership in UNESCO, and its reintegration to international society after the Second World War and before the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

Now, 70 years have passed since that beginning, UNESCO-related activities in Japan are facing new challenges.

UNESCO activities within an increasingly complex international society

With increasing mobility of people and things accompanying globalization and more intertwined international relations, backlash against globalization has risen and situations in the international community has increased its complexity. Moreover, with technological innovation like rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and the changes in our future society and lifestyles becoming more difficult to predict, having a vision for making sustainable societies and passing that onto the next generation is a common issue for both advanced and developing countries.

Within this context, UNESCO is implementing projects in various fields, including education, science, culture, and communication and information, with the aim of helping member states achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), and it is also undertaking initiatives in anticipation of the future society confronted with the ethics and governance of AI. In conjunction with that, under the leadership of the Secretary General, UNESCO is making efforts to avoid the politicization of deliberations and to promote friendship and mutual understandings among member states.

Defining our future society as “Society 5.0,” Japan is promoting reforms in all areas, and as a leading solution provider, Japan is in a position to lead discussions in UNESCO. Based on our responsibility of being the second biggest contributor among member states to UNESCO, Japan is being expected to fulfill a positive and active role, so that UNESCO’s activities in Japan and other countries will be activated based on UNESCO’s goals and aims since it was founded to construct the “defences of peace” in the minds of humanity.

UNESCO activities and regional revitalization in Japan

An urgent issue for local societies in Japan is regional revitalization that takes advantage of local characteristics as a resource. In order to revitalize regions by utilizing these regional resources, local communities should not aim only at getting these resources registered in UNESCO’s various designation frameworks. They also need, with the opportunities presented by UNESCO’s recognition, to energize activities for the symbiosis between the unique natural environment of each region and its culture and human society, and utilize them in a sustainable way for education, tourism.

Examples of regional UNESCO-related activities are not only grassroots donation-type activities for helping developing countries, such as the World Terakoya Movement which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year in 2019, but also many other activities for promoting international understanding and cooperation corresponding to particular situations in each local community and activities for preserving the environment and culture. In the future, with rapid increase in the numbers of foreigners living in Japan, it is expected that the internationalization of regional communities will be further advanced and their awareness of global issues will be deepened, making an international outlook and attitude increasingly important for people living in regional areas. Within this context of societal change, the value of regional UNESCO-related activities will be further reappreciated, and will be further enhanced for promoting mutual understanding with foreigners in regional societies and creating multicultural inclusive societies.

Leaders and supporters of UNESCO-related activities

Although in recent years it has been pointed out that the supporters of UNESCO-related activities in Japan are aging and the scope of their activities are shrinking, if we pay attention wider to activities being carried out to achieve the SDG's goals, the sphere of participants is expanding involving many young people, local governments, NPOs, private companies. With this deepened collaboration with diverse stakeholders, it is expected that the scope of UNESCO-related activities will be expanded and "all-Japan" strategic efforts will be promoted.

When UNESCO celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2015, the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO (JNCU) considered what kind of UNESCO-related activities should be carried out in the next generation. It compiled a Chair Statement that recommended three points for the role of UNESCO: 1) role as an "intellectual leader" in international society in the new era, 2) contribution to the realization of sustainable societies, and 3) contribution to the realization of societies that respect diversity. Carrying on these recommendations up to now, based on various new issues, JNCU hereby recommends the following measures for vitalizing UNESCO-related activities, focusing on the following areas, with the collaboration between the Government and relevant parties.

1. Maintaining the leading role in the promotion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) leading to the achievement of the SDGs

As a strong advocate for ESD, Japan should enhance UNESCO-related activities in and outside Japan, with the adoption in the fall of 2019 at UNESCO's resolution titled "Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs (ESD for 2030)", the new framework for the promotion of ESD.

In regards to ESD after the formulation of the SDGs, it will be necessary not only to spread knowledge about the SDGs but also to develop ways to make the concepts of ESD more understandable, viz., fostering the necessary capabilities of students as future creators of sustainable societies. Moreover, the utilization of platforms, which is recommended in section 5 in this proposal, is necessary for educators and a diverse range of stakeholders, including the private sector to collaborate for promoting ESD. In addition, there should be support for the improvement of instructional methods and the building of domestic and overseas networks to enhance the quality of the UNESCO Associated Schools, as the bases for ESD activities, and disseminate their outcomes.

To promote international cooperation, collaboration with diverse stakeholders should be promoted in a wide range of fields where Japan's experience can be utilized, such as improvements in curriculum for the promotion of ESD, improvements in teaching methods and learning environments, including the utilization of advanced technology, teacher education and training, and the making of safe school environments, through bilateral cooperation and collaboration, such as EDU-Port Japan, a project for promoting Japanese-style education overseas. Moreover, efforts should be made to facilitate the circulation of the outcomes of Japan's domestic educational activities and related international cooperation.

2. Promoting activities for the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development

It is recommended that the importance of ocean science for sustainable oceans be spread and emphasized as the world heads to the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, which starts in 2021. Inter-sectoral collaboration is also needed to contribute widely to the achievement of the SDGs, including collaboration with educators and education personnel to attain synergy with ESD.

3. Contributing to UNESCO reforms for the promotion of mutual understanding and friendship among member countries

It is recommended that Japan plays a role so that UNESCO's strategic transformation to enhance the mobility of UNESCO will be able to ensure the appropriate and effective implementation of UNESCO activities. The Japanese Funds-in-Trust should also be effectively utilized to enable contributions that make use of Japan's knowledge in regards to strategic initiatives in anticipation of UNESCO's future role for promoting "AI ethics" and "Education in the Future."

Japan also supports a comprehensive review of the Memory of the World Programme so that discussions regarding the registration will not become politicized, and cooperation for the enhancement of UNESCO's projects from the viewpoint of promoting friendship and mutual understanding among the member states.

4. Advancing regional revitalization and the building of multicultural inclusive societies utilizing the merits of UNESCO's activities

In regards to UNESCO's World Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Biosphere Reserves, UNESCO Global Geoparks, and Creative Cities Network programs, it is recommended to promote the active utilization of UNESCO designated sites in the field of education and tourism, from the perspective of building sustainable communities, so that diverse cultures will become resources for regional revitalization and further development of good examples and practices. Efforts should also be made to continue to make use, both within and outside Japan, of the preservation and restoration techniques/technology and extensive knowledge for the protection of cultural heritages that have been accumulated in each region. A virtuous cycle should be created for securing human resources that will inherit cultural heritages in the future, particularly by stimulating the interest and pride in these heritages of the younger generation.

Considering that UNESCO is the most familiar international organization in regional areas, and that regional societies are connected to the world through UNESCO-related activities including those of local UNESCO Associations, the enhancement and visualization of UNESCO-related activities at the local level should be promoted. It is also important to promote multicultural symbiotic programmes in order to respond to the internationalization of the local communities by ensuring mutual understanding between Japanese and non-Japanese.

5. Building of a strategic platform for deepening collaboration among various stakeholders

Together with youth, local governments, NPOs, private companies and others that are actively pursuing the realization of the SDGs, various stakeholders crossing generations and regions should collaborate to create a platform for co-creating the future of UNESCO activities. The platform should lead further enhancement of the UNESCO-related activities leading the solution of regional issues, strategically disseminate the results of its activities inside and outside of Japan, and promote the circulation of the outcomes of UNESCO-related activities in Japan and international cooperation.