

Collective contribution of NGOs to the preparation of the UNESCO Draft Programme and Budget for 2026-2029 (43 C/5), agreed at the International Conference of NGOs, 17-19 December 2024

Recalling the Directives concerning UNESCO's partnership with non-governmental organizations adopted by the General Conference at its 36th session (36 C/Res.108), inviting NGO partners to respond to the questionnaire, and the International Conference of NGOs to provide their recommendations to the Director-General on UNESCO's Draft Programme and Budget;

As a community primarily concerned with the same fields of competence as UNESCO, we welcome the ambitious presentation of a global, and far-reaching proposal for the Programme and Budget for 2026-2029. Accordingly, we call on Member States to ensure that the appropriate funding is made available, ensuring that capacity matches the level of ambition projected as we head towards the end of the mandate of the current Medium-Term Strategy, and edge ever-closer to 2030.

Having considered the Preliminary Proposals by the Director-General concerning the Draft Programme and Budget for 2026-2029 (43 C/5), and having further considered the decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its 220th session (220 EX), and the summary documents of consultations held in preparation for the drafting process (220 EX/17.INF and 220 EX/17.INF.2), the purpose of the current document is not to highlight or repeat the content but rather identify opportunities for strengthening the proposals in the view of the International Conference.

Accordingly, the 2024 International Conference of NGOs respectfully submits the following reflections and recommendations to the Director-General for her consideration.

UNESCO's mandate to unite humanity

Concerned with the continued and escalating wars, conflicts, and violence that threaten peace and the sustainable development of all countries and peoples, and exacerbate the existential threat to the world's most vulnerable, the International Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations welcomes the strong and clear presentation of the continued need for UNESCO's mandate in the Draft Programme and Budget for 2026-2029 (43 C/5). The particular emphasis on the contributions of Education, Natural Sciences, Social and Human Sciences, Culture, Communication and Information to the collective goal of peace are crucial, and must not be forgotten. Indeed, UNESCO's prominence in the United Nations ecosystem should be better recognised as the body uniquely charged with the creation of peace in the minds of men and women, and all of humanity.

The International Conference of NGOs further welcomes the emphasis of UNESCO as a place for dialogue, advocacy, and open discussion with a broad range of stakeholders.

Global Normative Instruments

The International Conference appreciates the strong references to UNESCO's role as an incubator for global standards and policy advice, and significant normative instruments such as the Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development (2023), Recommendation on Open Science (2021) and Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (2021).

However, we believe Proposed Focus Area 3.2 in particular would be strengthened by inclusion of NGO partners from, and working in, Africa. Emphasis should be placed on the facilitating role of civil society in addressing the "Call to Action Closing the Gender Gap in Science", aligning with the gender-mainstreaming objectives of the organisation, and reflecting significant activity of NGOs on this issue, as well as outcomes of the 17th International Forum of NGOs on the theme of African Leadership,

Experience and Expertise in the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development.; notably for science issues.

Furthermore, NGOs urge the integration of open educational resources into global normative instruments to support equitable and inclusive education.

Partnership and Delivery of UNESCO's Mandate

Noting the aspiration to “*empower change-makers to shape a brighter future*”, we welcome the prominent placement of partnerships within the Preliminary Proposals, and encourage Member States to ensure this language is preserved. Partnership with NGOs is the most reliable, and impactful pathway to building a more inclusive, equal, and informed global community, with those impacts felt at the grass-roots level. The International Conference recognises the prominent placement of partnerships within the document as an asset which accelerates the delivery of UNESCO programmes and priorities.

As noted in the Directives concerning UNESCO's partnership with non-governmental organisations, “*This partnership bears witness to the importance of the work of those organizations alongside government-sponsored action in international cooperation in the service of peoples for development, equality, international understanding and peace*”. We believe that this has never been more critical than in this time of rising political polarisation, worsening inequalities, and increasing poverty.

Recognising the value and benefit of multi-stakeholder partnership, and the contribution of private sector including commercial organisations, NGOs also express concern that UNESCO must not view the value of partnership through the lens of financial contribution alone. Knowledge partnerships, local and Indigenous knowledge, and the expertise of non-governmental partners gathered over many decades are crucial accelerators and contributors to UNESCO's programmatic work and must not be overlooked in favour of short-term funding.

Indeed, the International Conference echoes the sentiments expressed by Member States at the Committee on Non-Governmental Partners (NGP) at the 2024 Session of the Executive Board which called for support for strengthened capacity across the wider network of NGOs in official partnership to ensure broader, more diverse representation and consultation; allowing UNESCO to fully benefit from its extended family of Consultative and Associate partners.

Transversal Risks and Priorities

The International Conference of NGOs acknowledges the identification of three transversal programmatic risks, in the form of global political instability and conflict; natural disaster and climate change; and dramatic technological transformation.

Political Instability and the Power of Quality Education

In particular, the International Conference of NGOs emphasizes the critical importance of the recognition of education as a fundamental human right. When considering “Proposed Focus Area 6.1: Fostering peace through education.”, inputs received by NGOs in official partnership, reaffirm concern at the same level for inclusion, gender equality, and human rights for all, including marginalised groups such as migrants, refugees, and transgender people. We believe that these are indivisible concerns, and indivisible priorities – indeed, peace is not possible without education and opportunities for lifelong learning, informed by inclusivity, equality, human rights, and intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

Inclusion

The consistent concern expressed by NGOs in official partnership is for meaningful inclusion, diversity, and representation. This is crucial when considering political instability, conflict, climate change, natural disaster, and technological transformation. Additionally, addressing poverty as a core factor in inclusion and ensuring systemic political will to drive transformative change remain essential priorities. Further, it

is important to recognize and promote the benefits of physical activity and sport as a catalyst not just for health and well-being but for inclusion.

Recalling UNESCO's mainstreaming of gender as a positive step forward, and reiterating 220 EX/Decision 5.IV.A paragraphs 5 and 6, NGOs join member states in calling for disability inclusion to be mainstreamed across UNESCO's programme and administration.

Local and Indigenous Knowledge

If conflict poses the most visible existential risk to humanity, then climate must pose the most widespread and long-term. We strongly welcome Outcome Two – "*A world where biodiversity, water and the ocean are valued and sustainably managed*" – and call on Member States to ensure that strong language on protection of, and learning from, Indigenous and local knowledge is preserved in the final and adopted document. Whilst we express our confidence in UNESCO's role in the setting of standards, we also note concerns of NGOs and a broader network of civil society actors concerning the management of local, community, and Indigenous knowledge in the face of globalised knowledge commercialisation. NGOs stand ready to engage in participatory knowledge management and need support from UNESCO in guiding Member States to recognise the advantages of community knowledge leadership.

Climate

Furthermore, we recommend careful consideration of opportunities to strengthen participation of NGO partners in regional activities and programmes tackling gender and climate justice, with particular emphasis on the cross-cutting theme of crisis preparedness, emergency response, and early recovery.

Climate change, as a multifaceted challenge, significantly impacts communities globally, influencing not only the environment but also physical and mental health, social well-being, peace and stability, the preservation of culture, biodiversity, economic viability, and long-term sustainability.

The impacts of climate change extend far beyond the scientific and environmental domains where they have traditionally been relegated. To enact transformative global awareness and address the diverse dimensions of climate change, UNESCO must broaden its engagement strategy to include NGOs from a variety of sectors—not only science-based organizations. NGOs focused on social justice, public health, education, cultural preservation, and economic development must also play a central role in addressing the interconnected challenges posed by climate change.

Digital Transformation

Recalling the intervention made by the Chairperson of the International Conference of NGOs during the United Nations Civil Society Conference held in May 2024, and taking note of the adopted text of the Global Digital Compact (A/79/L.2), we reiterate the view that "an international scientific panel on Artificial Intelligence" would be best served by UNESCO's leadership, and organised with deep and broad multi-stakeholder participation from member states, digital platforms, intergovernmental organisations, media, academia, and crucially, a vast and diverse number of civil society actors. This process could emulate the mechanism established for the November 2023 "Guidelines for the governance of digital platforms", produced through three global multi-stakeholder consultations that gathered more than 10,000 comments from 134 countries and from many civil society organizations.

In addition, the International Conference emphasizes the importance of promoting open science, ethical AI, and sustainable technology practices under UNESCO initiatives. NGOs play a crucial role in ensuring the ethical governance of emerging technologies, as highlighted in paragraph 3C of the 2029 framework. UNESCO must also take steps to strengthen normative instruments that underline the role of science in protecting these frameworks and promoting responsible and equitable technological development.

Moreover, integrating science diplomacy and cultural diplomacy into development strategies is essential to fostering collaboration and ensuring that technological advancements serve inclusive and sustainable goals. This approach should be accompanied by rigorous data validation and assessment mechanisms to measure progress, particularly in areas like climate change education, where technology can drive impactful outcomes.

By reinforcing these priorities, UNESCO can position itself as a global leader in digital transformation, ensuring that technological progress aligns with ethical principles and contributes to sustainable development.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Connected to concerns previously expressed regarding inclusion and human rights-based approaches, the International Conference specifically highlights its concerns over the exponential increase in technology facilitated gender-based violence, discrimination, and exclusion of groups most at risk of being left behind. We encourage increased funding of gender-responsive programmes and transformative policy guidance to address discrimination in developing technologies; the involvement of women is essential to ensure that solutions are inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to the realities faced by women and notably and vulnerable communities.

Additionally, we recommend strengthening normative instruments to combat cyber-harassment and cyber-violence, ensuring the increased protection of women and girls in digital spaces. Though beyond the scope of the 43 C/5, we further recommend to Member States that they consider clear, enforceable frameworks and guidelines that hold perpetrators accountable while promoting safer online environments.

Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, including comprehensive sex education, are crucial for addressing a broad range of issues, and in particular there is a need for early childhood education centred on equality and diversity to inform future generations and address gender-based violence.

Global Priority Africa

The International Conference welcomes the continued prioritisation of Africa as an organisation-wide focus. Recalling the reflections of the recent 17th International Forum of NGOs on the theme of African Leadership, Experience and Expertise in the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development (10-11 December 2024), the International Conference of NGOs highlights the opportunity to engage more closely with those NGOs actively working from, in, and across Africa to ensure community engagement and greater programme impact.

This International Conference reiterates its strong support for UNESCO's Priority Africa, but calls on Member States and the organisation to ensure suitable, and sustained, funding for those other regions facing existential crisis and continued underrepresentation.

Specifically, we recommend adding "Strengthen cooperation between UNESCO and NGOs in official partnership" to the section titled "*Strengthening Capacities and Internal Coordination for Africa*" (220 EX/17 pages 47-48), noting the important role played by NGOs in support of and alongside Member States, National Commissions, UNESCO programme sectors and field offices.

More broadly, issues such as poverty, clean / potable water scarcity, sanitation and menstrual hygiene must be integrated throughout UNESCO's initiatives for Africa. These are fundamental to addressing the continent's priorities. Representation in media and public platforms must also remain a priority to amplify African voices globally, ensuring their perspectives are reflected in broader international discourse.

The role of youth is equally critical. UNESCO should strengthen the involvement of African youth organizations, aligning projects with their specific needs, including access to education, poverty reduction, and technology. This includes the development of concrete, actionable projects addressing Africa's unique challenges and opportunities, ensuring practical implementation and measurable impact.

By focusing on these areas, UNESCO can enhance its impact in Africa, ensuring its strategies and programs are both inclusive and responsive to the continent's specific needs and priorities. This renewed focus will also contribute to fostering sustainable development, strengthening local capacities, and amplifying African leadership on the global stage, whilst setting a pattern that should be expanded into other regions facing development and representational challenges.

Global Priority Gender

The increased integration of Gender Equality across UNESCO's programmes is welcomed by the International Conference, and the acceleration of the scaling of Gender Equality Marker 3, prioritising Gender Equality as the primary purpose of an initiative is equally well received. The International Conference would like to encourage the expansion of the Gender Equality regional and national capacity development programme, and in particular the training and advocacy mechanisms for senior managers, which will focus impact where it is needed most.

The International Conference also celebrates the proposal for investment in new partnership with UNESCO Chairs and National Commissions for UNESCO, civil society organisations, academia and the private sector as opportunities for resourcing Gender Equality, and recalls the significant contribution of NGOs in official partnership to the development, implementation, and success of such programmes globally.

Youth

The International Conference welcomes the continued emphasis on youth as a global priority, and central to UNESCO's policies and programmes. NGOs reaffirm that youth must be actively engaged in decision-making processes at all levels, reflecting their critical role as changemakers in addressing global challenges, including recognition of the role played by voluntary service as an accelerator.

We encourage Member States to prioritise the amplification of youth voices by prioritizing their concerns, including physical and mental health, leadership development, and opportunities to drive transformative change. To this end, it is essential to allocate more time and space in discussions to explore youth-specific topics and ensure that their perspectives are meaningfully integrated into global frameworks.

Furthermore, NGOs highlight the need for UNESCO to define its support for changemakers, providing clear mechanisms to amplify youth actions and ensure their contributions are visible and impactful. By recognizing the potential of young people as drivers of innovation and social change, UNESCO can solidify its commitment to building inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies.

Culture as an enabler and driver of Sustainable Development

Recalling the crucial cooperation between UNESCO and its networks of NGOs in advocating for the recognition of culture as crucial component of sustainable development, we enthusiastically welcome Action 11 of the Pact for the Future (A/Res/79/1) adopted by United Nations Member States in 2024, and Outcome Four of the Preliminary Proposals.

The International Conference celebrates the intention of UNESCO to further integrate culture into humanitarian, security, peacebuilding, and recovery processes to reinforce community resilience. We

believe, nevertheless, that the seven proposed Focus Areas within Outcome Four are weakened by the lack of specific reference to the critical role played by NGOs as promoters, protectors, and champions of culture. In the 2022-2024 mandate the NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee, Culture Sector, and the #Culture2030Goal campaign of NGOs have together carried out significant, impactful, and successful advocacy and this should not be overlooked when considering capacity for further activities.

Conclusion

The International Conference expresses its most sincere dedication to collective action in support of UNESCO's mandate and priorities. We stand ready to move into the period covered by the next Budget and Programme with UNESCO, pledging our commitment to building effective, efficient, and energetic partnerships focused on delivery of the engagement of global civil society in building and safeguarding peace in the minds of women, men, children and those of diverse identity.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the gathered NGOs in official partnership with UNESCO by

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