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Soft power for peace and development

Winning over hearts and minds to the importance of leaving no one behind will be critical to achieving the 2030 Agenda

By **Irina Bokova**, Director-General, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is today based in Paris, but the organisation was born in London. UNESCO's constituent conference in November 1945 was presided by Ellen Wilkinson, then UK Minister of Education. The idea of creating such an organisation had emerged as early as 1942, when London hosted regular conferences of allied ministers of education. These conferences brought together governments in exile from countries under occupation. The war was far from over, but the UK was putting forward education as a force for peace.

This vision of 'soft power' is written into the DNA of UNESCO, expressed in the

opening lines of its constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."

Today, I believe this vision has never rung so true. In a world featuring as much opportunity as challenge, we need soft power more than ever to strengthen the foundations of peace and craft new paths to inclusive, sustainable development. The year 2015 was one of great international agreements: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Soft power is essential to taking these forward.

The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), charts a new vision for cooperation over the next 15 years. This is to ensure prosperity and

wellbeing for all societies, while protecting the planet and strengthening peace. Inclusivity, integration and universality – these are three hallmarks of the new agenda. The SDGs represent the most ambitious and comprehensive agenda ever seen: to leave no one behind.

This new agenda is a paradigm shift at many levels. It connects all 17 SDGs and calls for cooperation in a universal manner, transcending the classic international development model and setting out a far-reaching vision of peace, and just and effective governance. As a universal agenda, it holds to account developed and developing countries alike.

'Business as usual' will not be enough to take the 2030 Agenda forward. We need a break in how we work, how we cooperate and how we partner. This concerns governments as well as civil society and the private sector. We need 'all-government' and 'all-society' action, along with integrated analysis and planning, to look at development holistically. This means relying more on domestic resources, together with innovative financing and new mobilisation of aid and its stronger alignment, complemented by stronger South-South cooperation.

All of this underlines the importance of UNESCO's universal mandate to contribute

◀ September 2016: members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) at their encampment in Llanos del Yari, Colombia, celebrate the prospect of peace after 52 years of armed conflict with the Colombian government

to the “building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information”.

New approaches

Human rights and dignity are the starting point for the organisation’s action – and the criteria for assessing its results. Its focus is on the most disadvantaged and excluded groups, with priority given to countries and segments of societies furthest behind in achieving the SDGs.

UNESCO gives global priority to promoting gender equality in all its policies and programmes, to realise the full potential of both halves of humanity. UNESCO also emphasises action with those countries in conflict and crisis, or affected by disasters, seeking to build their resilience.

UNESCO is bringing all its weight to support countries through new, innovative and integrated approaches. These range from supporting quality education for all, freedom of expression and social inclusion to promoting integrated water resources management and ocean sustainability; bolstering science, technology and innovation to mitigate and adapt to climate change; and protecting cultural and natural heritage through its UNESCO designated sites (World Heritage sites, biosphere reserves and Global Geoparks). The organisation is also working to prevent violent extremism and ‘cultural cleansing’, as threats to peace and obstacles to sustainable development.

In addition, UNESCO is collecting and disseminating data on the global and thematic indicators needed for the review and follow-up of many of these goals. While focusing on the nine SDGs that have direct relevance to UNESCO’s mandate, the organisation’s actions will contribute to all of the SDGs.

To support countries in embedding the SDGs into national plans and budgets



(and support their follow-up and review), UNESCO is providing demand-driven, evidence-based normative and policy advice in its areas of competence. The organisation is also delivering capacity-building, including on data collection and analysis.

To facilitate this, I am determined to forge new multi-stakeholder partnerships, and support South–South and North–South–South cooperation. I have created a dedicated task force to ensure sharp, effective and coordinated support to countries as they take forward, implement and review the 2030 Agenda.

UNESCO also works to leverage new funding to support SDG implementation through mechanisms like the Education Cannot Wait fund, launched at the

World Humanitarian Summit to help deliver education in emergencies and protracted crises.

It also works with the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, which will put forward clear and convincing recommendations to raise additional resources for education.

Accelerating momentum is a human rights imperative, a development imperative, and a peace imperative. It is about delivering on the collective promise we made – as the United Nations, as governments, as the wider public – to build a better future for all.

It is our responsibility to meet expectations and to do everything to translate promises into reality. This is UNESCO’s pledge – now, and in the years to come. ●