

The global community: both commitment and source of inspiration

Berlin Declaration on the 75th Anniversary of the German Commission for UNESCO

Our world is characterised by growing geopolitical tension, an erosion of international norms and a fragmentation of global co-operation. In addition, our planet faces existential ecological crises. Precisely for these reasons, UNESCO's constitutional mandate to contribute to peace and security through education, science and culture has even gained in significance recently, indeed because of all attacks and challenges.

The Federal Republic of Germany was admitted to UNESCO in 1951. Applying for UNESCO membership was a commitment to rejoin the global community and to contribute to peaceful co-operation – particularly in areas where totalitarian ideology had sought to seize control of the human spirit: in education, science, culture and communication. From the very beginning, the German Commission for UNESCO has made concrete contributions to multilateral understanding. Its history reflects the commitment to building bridges across divides and to trying to convince the German society to be part of a values-based, open world.

Due to its work during decades of the Cold War, UNESCO proved to be a valuable forum for professional and cultural exchange across ideological divides – the German Polish textbook co-operation and the exchange between East and West at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning are outstanding examples. At the time, the German Commission for UNESCO made significant contributions to establishing the concept of lifelong learning and, in biosphere reserves, the concept of sustainable development. Following German reunification and the integration of both National Commissions for UNESCO, the German Commission for UNESCO co-operated more decisively with the Global South, particularly Africa; it responded to crisis situations such as in the case of the former Yugoslavia; it provided dialogue formats such as the Euro-Arab Dialogue, the co-operation with the Ukrainian National Commission and its advocacy work for Sudan.

For the German Commission for UNESCO, as for all National Commissions, multilateralism means more than the principle of equitable co-operation among states: multilateralism also means involving civil society, academia and culture in structured and value-adding ways in processes of inter-state consensus-building. This also includes the targeted participation of young people and youth organisations.

We reflect on the success of the work of the German Commission for UNESCO on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, as a commitment towards the future. We plead for democracy rather than authoritarianism, alliances rather than isolation, international law rather than arbitrary decision-making, rule of law rather than might makes right. These values must be defended and further developed in the interests of Germany and of a strong UNESCO.

We draw inspiration from the history of the German Commission for UNESCO to face up to realities and to understand multilateralism as a dynamic process of constant negotiation, the values of which require constant promotion and defence.

We reaffirm the central importance of education, science, culture and communication. Education is a sector in which investment across the entire educational chain adds enormous value to individual development, society, peace and prosperity. Science and research lay the foundations for evidence-based decision-making. Independent media serve as a democratic safeguard against manipulation, disinformation and social division. Understood well in a democratic sense, culture stands for pluralism and human rights, fostering cohesion and resilience. Science, the arts and the press are rightly underpinned by constitutional fundamental freedoms and human rights. They are an indispensable source of knowledge, creativity and innovation, for democracy, social dialogue, freedom of expression and diversity of opinion. They are pillars of our free society and security.

We are committed to not taking multilateralism for granted. We want to make its added value tangible for people. We are committed to international understanding and cross-border co-operation to address societal challenges, even if this often requires patience.

We highlight the great importance of internationally agreed principles and standards, such as those adopted by UNESCO – for neurotechnology, artificial intelligence, ocean management, sustainable tourism all the way to education for human rights and for democracy. Recent years have shown that the importance of such standards has increased significantly, for all nations. It is crucial that such standards are formulated jointly by all Member States and underpinned in a substantive way by the scientific community and civil society – as UNESCO ensures.

We hope for a future for the “kulturweit” volunteering programme, through which, successfully for 17 years, the German Commission for UNESCO has promoted young people’s openness to the world.

We emphasise the great importance of the globally shared system of Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Through its work, particularly in leading the coordination of SDG 4, UNESCO demonstrates that progress is possible worldwide, including here in Germany. We therefore advocate for the Agenda to be continued beyond 2030. We also call for an appropriate continuation of the “ESD for 2030” programme as a framework for transformative education. We strongly advocate for the expansion of the 2030 Agenda to include a standalone goal for culture. We also propose that greater consideration be given to academic freedom and media diversity in such extension.

Our own history clearly demonstrates that National Commissions can promote multilateralism in a successful manner. We wish to further strengthen international co-operation among National Commissions, involving the wider UNESCO family and other civil society actors. As stated in our 2025 declaration “Strengthening Europe”, we have always regarded ourselves as a *European* National Commission.

The potential of UNESCO’s networks – World Heritage sites, Global Geoparks and Biosphere Reserves, Associated Schools, Chairs, Category 1 and Category 2 institutes, and Creative and Learning Cities – is far from being fully realised. Above all, we wish to promote their role in engaging civil society as a diplomatic force and fostering trust between states and peoples. We therefore commit ourselves to continuing our international role in working with UNESCO networks in an innovative and pioneering manner and to supporting the engagement of young people.

We stand by our commitment to draw inspiration from the spirit of renewal of 1951 and the effective work which the German Commission for UNESCO has demonstrated ever since. Through our work, we contribute to promoting pluralism and countering state totalitarian ideology. We commit to continually reaffirm the values and goals of UNESCO as a necessity and uphold them in collaboration with our partners.