

UNESCO YOUTH FORUM

Background

Bridging the inevitable gap between young people and a highly complex international organisation with its many partners and networks proves to be a challenging task: the UNESCO Youth Forum, an integral part of the Organisation's General Conference, has emerged as a very important tool in this respect.

UNESCO's General Conference, the Organisation's highest decision-making body, meets every two years at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (in September / October). Representatives of all the Member States assemble and decide on UNESCO's general orientation and budget for the following two years. The UNESCO Youth Forum, held a few days before the General Conference kicks off, brings together young delegates from all over the world to exchange views, share experiences, reflect together and, above all, detect common preoccupations and problems. This means that young people have the opportunity to make their voices heard by the General Conference, and that way, to contribute to its work.

The first UNESCO Youth Forum was held at the 30th General Conference (1999), and since then the Forums have gone from strength to strength. The young delegates spend three to four days in plenary sessions and working groups, and they produce a final report that sums up all of their deliberations. This report is then presented at the opening plenary session of the General Conference, allowing for the young delegates' views, concerns and recommendations to be taken into account by the representatives of the Member States and the UNESCO Secretariat at the General Conference. In recognition of its importance, the 2003 General Conference voted to make the Youth Forum a permanent feature of the UNESCO General Conference.

The 2005 UNESCO Youth Forum

The most recent UNESCO Youth Forum (the fourth edition) was held from the 30th of September to the 2nd of October 2005 in UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. It preceded the 33rd General Conference, and brought together 237 participants with 189 delegates from 129 countries and 48 observers from international youth networks, governments and National Commissions for UNESCO.

The theme of the 2005 Forum was 'Young People and the Dialogue among Civilisations, Cultures and Peoples - Ideas for action in education, the sciences, culture and communication'. As at previous Forums, the participants discussed ideas for action in education, the sciences, culture and communication and information, youth-led and youth-targeted action to promote dialogue in plenary sessions and working groups.

The Report of the 4th UNESCO Youth Forum (2005), adopted after three days of intense debate and introduced at the opening plenary of the 33rd UNESCO General Conference, outlined the young delegates' recommendations and proposals for youth-driven action to encourage and support dialogue at all levels of society.

The report strongly recommended that preparatory regional UNESCO Youth Forums should take place in 2006-2007, on 'Young People and the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples', with a specific focus on 'Education for Sustainable Development' and 'Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue to ensure Peace.'¹

Regional Forums

In the immediate follow-up to this Forum, UNESCO identified mechanisms and potential partnerships with a view to organizing preparatory Youth Forums in six regions prior to the 2007 UNESCO Youth Forum.

This series of Forums, each following the model of the UNESCO Youth Forum, will ensure that the immense potential of youth-driven initiatives is taken full advantage of, and provide for the development and consolidation of partnerships and networks between young people, youth organizations, UNESCO and other partners.

The objectives are:

- To allow youth delegates to elaborate specific themes and related recommendations for action in favour of dialogue by and for young people.
- To consolidate and encourage networks and partnerships between young people, youth organizations, UNESCO and other partners concerned with youth and dialogue in the region.
- To define concrete youth-led follow up projects and initiatives in the region, which shall be supported with seed funding through a Regional Youth Project Fund.

The organization of Regional Youth Forums is part of UNESCO's effort to promote Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples in line with the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 2001.

Based on the recommendations of the 2005 Youth Forum Report, the overall theme of all regional forums is: **"Young People and the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples: Ideas for action in education, the sciences, culture and communication"**.

Under this theme, two sub-themes have been recommended as specific foci of the regional youth forums:

- **"Education for sustainable development"**; and
- **"Intercultural and interfaith dialogue to ensure peace"**.

Fostering dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples in the service of peace has long been one of UNESCO's objectives and has become ever more important in today's world, where learning to live with diversity is no longer optional. UNESCO is convinced that today's young generation, owing to its vision, commitment, imagination and needs, is

¹ To consult the Webpage of the 2005 Youth Forum please go to:
<http://unesco.takingitglobal.org/index.en.html?>

particularly well placed to work towards enduring and meaningful dialogue for mutual understanding. Such dialogue must be based on openness towards others and willingness to shed misconceptions and stereotypes in order to generate confidence and trust across cultural and national borders.

Young people dispose of an enormous potential to build bridges between society's various stakeholders and can thus engage in practical action leading to tangible results. So, the dialogue among cultures and peoples needs the visions, ideas and commitment of young people!

Where?

UNESCO is organising six regional Youth Forums for: the Pacific (17 to 22 July 2006); the Euro-Mediterranean region (16 to 19 November 2006); the Americas (9-15 September 2007); Africa (24-28 September 2007); Asia (25 to 29 June 2007); and the Arab States (1-3 September 2007).²

The Regional Forum for the Americas

Two Members of the Youth Advisory Group, Ms. Kimia Ghomeshi and Mr. Benjamin Powless, have been selected to represent Canada at the Regional Forum, which will be held in Mexico. The outcomes of the pan Canadian consultations will certainly be of great help for them as well.

The 5th UNESCO Youth Forum (October 12-13, 2007)

Held just before the 34th General Conference of the Organization, this year's Youth Forum will give its young participants the opportunity to evaluate the series of regional youth forums and contribute to the work of the two Ministerial Roundtables that will take place during the General Conference, on:

- **Education and economic development;** and
- **The contribution of science and technology to sustainable development – the role of UNESCO.**

The outcomes of the Regional Youth Forums will also be discussed.

Please note that the results of the youth consultations will be shared with the Members of the Canadian delegation attending those two roundtables.

² To know more about the Regional Forums please refer to http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php-URL_ID=11085&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html