

UNESCO and the Culture of Peace¹

Barend ter Haar²

Summary

Culture of Peace is presented by UNESCO as the first of its two Overarching Objectives, but its *action programme for a Culture of Peace* is full of empty rhetoric. To prevent damage to its credibility, UNESCO should concentrate on its concrete tasks as specialised organisation for education, science, culture and communication.

Introduction

Culture of Peace shows UNESCO both at its best and at its worst. The recognition by the founders of UNESCO that lasting peace cannot be built on political and military measures is UNESCO at its best. It remains of fundamental importance to recognise that lasting peace requires a fundamental different look at matters of war and peace, i.e. a change of culture. But its *action programme for a Culture of Peace* shows UNESCO at its worst, rhetoric instead of concrete action.

When UNESCO was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, the overriding objective was to lay the foundations for lasting peace. The Preamble of UNESCO's Constitution therefore starts with the recognition "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". It is in the same spirit that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared 2000 the *International Year for the Culture of Peace* and 2001-2010 as the *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World*. When the UN UNGA adopted in 1999 a *Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace* (A/RES/53/243), it pointed to the important role of UNESCO plays in the promotion of a culture of peace.

That explains why Culture of Peace is presented as the first of the two Overarching Objectives of UNESCO³. But what is UNESCO actually doing to promote this objective? This paper will answer that question by having a closer look at UNESCO's *action programme for a culture of peace* for 2012 and 2013. After noting that this programme is unrealistic and impracticable, suggestions will be made for a different approach.

What is a Culture of Peace?

The first hurdle for promoting a Culture of Peace is the lack of a generally accepted definition, partly because there is no generally accepted definition of peace. There are few words that are so easily used to fool other people as the word "peace". Take the *Pax Romana*. That was a kind of peace, but for the people that did not accept Roman authority this peace meant war. When a

¹ This paper is based on the Peace Palace Library Lecture delivered by the author on 17 June 2013 in the Peace Palace in The Hague.

² Barend ter Haar is Senior Research Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for International Relations Clingendael. From 2007 to 2011 he was ambassador of the Netherlands to UNESCO. This paper reflects only his personal views.

³ See <http://en.unesco.org> under *About us*.

government is telling you “I bring you peace”, it often means “peace on our terms” which in reality might mean war.

So, how can we agree on a definition of culture of peace without defining peace first? The UN General Assembly seemed to come close when in 1998⁴ it defined it as consisting “of values, attitudes and behaviours that reflect and inspire social interaction and sharing based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, all human rights, tolerance and solidarity, that reject violence and endeavour to prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation and that guarantee the full exercise of all rights and the means to participate fully in the development process of their society”. However, the next year it adopted a different description in its Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace.

It is not surprising that many people react suspiciously when “Culture of Peace” is mentioned, because the concept is so easily robbed from any concrete meaning. However the idea behind the concept is sound, because a durable peace cannot be brought about without changing a culture that holds warriors in higher esteem than peacemakers. One of the reasons that the First World War broke out was that at that time many people had a preference for a honourable war above a compromised peace.

UNESCO’s action programme for a culture of peace

UNESCO’s *action programme for a culture of peace* forms part of UNESCO’s Programme and Budget for the years 2012 and 2013. We will leave the introductory paragraphs aside and go immediately to the more operational part that consists of seven *Main objectives*, seven *Main areas of action* and six *Flagship activities*.

To get the full flavour of these twenty points, they should be read in full. But presenting them in an abridged form will suffice to make clear that implementation of this programme in a period of two years is completely unrealistic and that the *Intersectoral platform for a culture of peace and non-violence* that was set up within the UNESCO Secretariat to develop, manage and coordinate this programme was given an impossible task.

The *Main objectives* are the following:

1. A global movement in favour of a culture of peace;
2. Improve the world’s global understanding and deconstruct preconceived ideas;
3. Commitment by States to nurture “everyday peace”;
4. Guidelines for a global curriculum to foster a culture of peace;
5. Raise awareness about violence;
6. Strengthen links between intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity;
7. Identify/create “hubs of peace building”.

In the light of the above, the following *areas for action* will be developed and coordinated by the intersectoral platform:

⁴ A/RES/52/13

1. Improvement of access to education, with emphasis on human rights, etc.
2. Greater opportunities for research and public debates illustrating cultural exchanges.
3. Promotion of the role of creativity.
4. Contribution of the media to change the perception of different cultures.
5. Recognition of knowledge which contributes to biodiversity, sustainable development, human rights, philosophy and intercultural dialogue.
6. Educational programme to stop violence in schools.
7. Learning from the past: promote dialogue for reconciliation.

And finally, the following Flagship activities will be developed and managed by the intersectoral platform:

1. Develop a Global Consciousness to overcome national fixations and to redefine our relationship with nature.
2. Create a digital library on major scientific and cultural landmarks.
3. Develop "E-Notebooks on peace and intercultural dialogue".
4. Promote education for a culture of peace.
5. Promote high profile events such as exhibitions and prizes.
6. Set up an interactive e-portal, as a unique place of dialogue and mutual understanding.

We will now have a slightly closer look at one example of each category, beginning with the first flagship activity:

Develop a Global Consciousness (..) (t)o overcome national fixations, ethnic narrow narratives and instrumental ways of perceiving the world, and to redefine our relationship with nature (..).

According to the Action Programme, this flagship activity will be developed and managed by the intersectoral platform. "Develop a Global Consciousness" is clearly an impossible and unrealistic task. If this type of approach would work, the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation should write in their action plans *Make everybody healthy* and *Give everybody a decent job* and the world would be a much better place.

Now take the first "area for action":

Improvement of access to formal and non-formal education, with emphasis on quality education for all, education on human rights, cultural diversity, gender equality and the integration of marginalized groups (..)." "Particular attention will be paid to (..)

- Revision of textbooks and improvement of learning materials, especially in history,*
- Using the UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network as an outreach possibility,*
- Support online exchanges (..) in order to help stop violence.*
- Develop teacher-training handbooks on new intercultural competences*
- Support exchange on education for peace, human rights and tolerance.*

This will be "developed and coordinated by the intersectoral platform". It is a peculiar combination of practical points such as *Using the UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network* and ideals that are far beyond the capacities of the

intersectoral platform to “develop and coordinate”, such as revision of history textbooks. As a whole this area for action is completely unrealistic.

Let us finally have a look at the fourth objective:

“To establish guidelines for a global curriculum which foster a culture of peace, promote humanism and intercultural competences and are conducive to a practice of “cardinal virtues” (temperance, courage, wisdom and justice) as well as of empathy, hospitality, harmonious coexistence and appreciation of diversity (..)”.

According to the action programme this objective “will be pursued through concrete programmes”. Again, this goal is very nice, but establishing such guidelines for a global (!) curriculum is far, very far beyond what UNESCO could accomplish, even when its budget would be doubled.

When judging this action programme it should be remembered that it speaks about global tasks: a global consciousness, global access to education and a global curriculum, and that it is the work programme for 2012 and 2013, not for 2030 or so. A few of the Platform’s plans, such as the organisation of exhibitions, might be within reach, but they are no excuse for the unrealistic character of the rest of the programme.

The available funds

In the regular budget for 2012 and 2013 an amount of \$ 1 488 700 was allocated for the intersectoral platform for the culture of peace. When this would be spread evenly over the twenty objectives, areas of action and activities, it would leave \$ 35,000 a year for each item. As the Action Plan of the intersectoral platform partly overlaps with the plans of UNESCO’s five main sectors, part of it might be funded out of the sectoral budgets. In addition one might look for extra-budgetary funds. But who is going to provide funds for activities as vague as developing a Global Consciousness, without a concrete plan how the funds would be spent?

The available personnel

To support the intersectoral platform on a culture of peace and non-violence a small implementation unit of four people is available. However, like the other members of the intersectoral platforms, they fulfil this task in addition to their regular tasks in the Secretariat. The head of this unit, for example, is also director of the Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue within the Department of Culture.

What are the results?

What will be the results of a very ambitious action programme if there is almost no money available, nor sufficient staff? The official website of UNESCO provides sort of an answer, and in particular the webpage about *Upcoming Conferences and Events* under the heading *Culture of Peace and Non-Violence*. One might expect that any concrete result of the programme would have been noted on this webpage.

On 17 June 2013, the text of this website was as follows:

Upcoming Conferences and Events

High-Level Debate on building a culture of peace in the 21st century, on the occasion of the International Day for Peace, UN Headquarters, 21 September 2012

Launch of a Global contest "Pathways to a Culture of Peace: Global Contest for Mutual Understanding", on the occasion of the International Day for Peace, 21 September 2012

Third High Panel on Peace and Dialogue among Cultures, 19 November 2012

Please note that on June 17 2013, the official website of the intersectoral panel mentioned only some upcoming events in 2012. Of course, this is just the official website, not its official report. But let us not fool ourselves. Half a year before the end of the biennium 2012, 2013 implementation of the ambitious programme had not even seriously started.

To be fair, it should be added that the UNESCO secretariat plays a useful role in supporting civil society activities that are directed at establishing or strengthening a culture of peace, such as UNESCO's Associated Schools Project. This is useful, but it is very little in comparison with the official programme.

Conclusion: Why does UNESCO adopt unfeasible plans?

Why did the Secretariat in 2011 propose a work programme for 2012 and 2013 that it knew it could not implement? Why did the Member States accept an action programme that was clearly unrealistic? Why didn't the Director-General tell the Member States that the credibility of UNESCO would be undermined if it adopted programmes that could not be implemented? Why does UNESCO present Culture of Peace so prominently as one of its two Overarching Objectives if it has no real plans to pursue this objective? These are important questions, because the credibility of UNESCO as a whole is at stake. If this part of UNESCO's work programme is not to be taken seriously, what about the other parts?

Promoting a culture of peace might seem to be just one of many subjects on UNESCO's work programme, but it is much more than that, because it is exemplary of two fundamental problems UNESCO is wrestling with since its inception: the distinction between the fundamental ideals of the organisation and its practical tasks and the unwise division of responsibilities between the Member States and the Secretariat.

In a forthcoming publication it will be shown that the observed gap between high objectives and low achievements is not limited to the Culture of Peace, but covers a large part of UNESCO's agenda. To a large extent this seems to be the result of two problems UNESCO has been wrestling with since its foundation: a confusion of fundamental ideals and practical tasks and an inappropriate division of responsibilities between the Member States and the Secretariat.

There are tasks that the Secretariat is better able to perform than the individual Member States, such as the collection of international statistics, but most of UNESCO's tasks can only be fulfilled by the Member States themselves.

Delegating them to the Secretariat means in practice accepting that they will not be fulfilled.

Recommendations

UNESCO should take itself seriously

In order to be taken seriously by others, UNESCO should take itself seriously and stop adopting declaratory work programmes that it cannot and will not implement.

Make a distinction between fundamental ideals and practical tasks

Promoting peace and a culture of peace are fundamental ideals that should guide what UNESCO does. However, fundamental ideals should not be confused with practical tasks. UNESCO's practical task is to serve as the specialised organisation of the United Nations in the fields of education, science, culture and communication. By fulfilling these tasks it can play a crucial role to promote its ideals.

Focus on fulfilling practical tasks

If UNESCO really, not just rhetorically, wants to contribute to durable peace, the best it can do is to fulfil its functions in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, e.g. by making sure that everybody in the world gets appropriate education, that the results of scientific research are used for the benefit of mankind and that natural and cultural heritage are respected and protected.

Give the responsibility to fulfil UNESCO's mandate to the Member States

The fulfilment of these tasks requires a radical change in the way UNESCO works. Not the Secretariat but the Member States are responsible for education for all and for a proper use of science and of the results of scientific research. These responsibilities cannot be delegated to the Secretariat.

Focus UNESCO's work programme on the responsibilities of the Member States

As the Member States will have to fulfil UNESCO's tasks, UNESCO's work programme should concentrate on what the Member States agree to do with the support of the Secretariat, not, as currently usually is the case, on what the Secretariat plans to do with the support of the Member States.