



57th Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO

Climate Change, Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship: What are UNESCO and its networks' roles?

Current situation

Planetary environmental changes, including climate change, are some of the most serious contemporary challenges affecting the survival of the human race. The effects of climate change, loss of biodiversity, and harsher and more extreme weather are producing a host of concomitant economic, cultural and social impacts. Many plant and animal species have become extinct or threatened, crop yields have been compromised, and in 2016, there were more than 65 million displaced people in the world due to conflict, economic pressures or climate change. This rapid degradation of the living environment is closely linked to a process of globalization characterized by growing socioeconomic and cultural gaps reflected in an accelerating, but unsustainable ecological footprint, as a result of unsustainable production and consumption patterns in wealthier countries. To develop effective solutions in this context, it is essential to understand how global environmental changes will affect different social groups and sectors.

Since the challenges posed by environmental changes are rooted in society as well as in the environment, they require an integrated approach involving every citizen, scientific and traditional knowledge, and political, economic and cultural powers. The adoption of a socio-ecological approach to protect biodiversity and the environment can help communities flourish and ensure social equity and well-being for all members of society in the interests of a sustainable future.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global warming could, if the current progression is maintained, raise the planet's average temperature far more than 2°C by the end of the 21st century – in other words, an increase that would severely disrupt the planet's social and environmental balance. Therefore, it is essential that steps now be taken on a planet-wide scale to slow down global warming and adapt to phenomena such as higher sea levels and extreme weather like drought, excessive precipitation and sub-zero temperatures. It was in this spirit that the international community came to a historic agreement at the 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP21) during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Paris, in 2015. Achieving the target of the Paris Agreement, the first universal agreement on climate – mainly consists of containing global warming to an increase below 2°C – will also be pursued within a wider context of implementing the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, whose 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are designed to eradicate poverty, protect the planet and guarantee prosperity for all. Today, 30 years after the publication of the Brundtland Report,¹ which highlighted the concept of sustainable development for the first time, it is clear that mitigation of and adaptation to climate change will only be truly possible if steps are taken as part of a global effort that factor in the environment, future generations, and social, cultural and human dimensions.

¹ *Our Common Future*, Report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987

UNESCO | An interdisciplinary approach to the problematic

“No single discipline or scientific domain can understand, let alone address, the complex challenges involved in environmental change and sustainability.”²

As a unique platform for promoting a multi-sector approach to the complex issues associated with climate change and sustainable development, the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) is well placed to contribute towards concerted actions. The organization’s 52 programs, networks and initiatives support the contributions of knowledge, education and communication towards an understanding of climate change and the socio-economic, cultural and ethical implications for both present and future generations. It is through these contributions that UNESCO helps achieve the international community’s major environmental and climate change objectives.

For example, UNESCO encourages collaboration and dialogue among the human, social and natural sciences. The adoption of a responsible and ethical approach in research plays a critical role in the quest for sustainable innovations and solutions. In fact, the application of these solutions is closely linked to education, awareness-raising and the involvement of society at large. UNESCO helps develop the spirit of global citizenship necessary to make us more aware of the consequences of our actions so that we behave in more sustainable ways.

Climate change clearly does not have the same type or scale of impact on every Canadian. Government strategies to limit climate change and the decline in biodiversity while making a greater effort to mitigate extreme weather can make both communities and individuals more resilient, by encouraging modes of production and housing with smaller carbon footprints and reducing extreme gaps in income, education and culture. These issues of social equity must be examined in order to find solutions that are fair for all concerned. A draft *Declaration on Ethical Principles in Relation to Climate Change* will be submitted to the Member States at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2017. This declaration covers topics like the precautionary approach, viability, vulnerable groups, education, and scientific knowledge and integrity in decision-making. This declaration could strengthen the underlying principles of the SDGs as well as the Paris Agreement in order to help governments design, select and communicate the most suitable and most equitable measures for tackling climate change. Therefore it becomes essential to discuss these challenges and define how they will be taken into account when defining actions and strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change in Canada. The proposal of a draft declaration on the rights of humanity and future generations, which was submitted by France to the UN Secretary-General during the meeting to ratify COP21 in March 2016, aims to refresh and expand the concept of human rights by including these new planetary challenges for existing humanity and for future generations.

Lastly, it is vital to refer to other sources of knowledge and experience when formulating the policies and steps needed for inclusive sustainable development. UNESCO, therefore, strives to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous views and knowledge on these issues. For example, the organization promotes recognition of the value of systems of local knowledge and Indigenous practices, whose holistic vision of the environment and society contain different perspectives about adapting to climate change and developing innovative solutions. UNESCO is also striving to give a voice to marginalized minority groups

² Summary. *World Social Science Report*, 2013, p. 5

and engage more vulnerable communities, that is to say those that have developed their cultures in a symbiotic relationship with the environment, such as local communities living in the Arctic, on islands or in coastal regions, whose very existence is threatened by the effects of climate change. UNESCO similarly encourages a true understanding and consideration of the gender factor when analyzing issues and recommending solutions, which includes the importance of giving girls and women a greater role in sustainable solutions. UNESCO also encourages young people and ethno-cultural communities to be agents of change and make their voices heard about the various factors related to climate change.

AGM | Programming and lines of action

The achievement of international climate change objectives calls for efforts to raise awareness, change behaviour and mindsets, and mobilize a number of actors (governments, civil society, private sector). The 57th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) should therefore be an occasion to synthesize the views of experts, from a wide range of disciplines, in order to improve our understanding of the environmental, cultural, social and ethical challenges facing us, with a particular emphasis on input from young people and Indigenous knowledge. The AGM will also be an opportunity for CCUNESCO to identify priority lines of action in order to elicit contributions from its members and networks concerning these issues, in the aim to create more sustainable societies.

We recommend that the above-mentioned theme be explored in three parts at the AGM. First, to open discussions, speakers will be invited to explore the main social, environmental, human, economic and political challenges at this point in time, and describe the historical context of climate change issues. The speakers would address the following questions, among others:

- What is the current state of research on climate change, the loss of biodiversity and sustainable development?
- What are the main issues and challenges in developing and adopting mitigation and adaptation strategies?
- What are some of the potential socioeconomic, political and ethical approaches towards adopting equitable, ethical and viable strategies?

The second part of the AGM will focus on various strategies and will include discussions about the public's right to information, the rights and responsibilities of both existing humanity and future generations, and the protection and sharing of knowledge (including Indigenous knowledge). In order to leave no one behind, this part of the meeting will also focus on the respective roles of both formal and informal education with respect to climate change, sustainable development and global citizenship. Lastly, the overall emphasis will be on the expertise of our networks in relation to these issues and the concrete steps they might take. A call for proposals will be distributed via our networks and our partners, who will be asked to submit contributions, such as thematic issues papers (which could be distributed to the participants beforehand), workshop proposals, proposals for awareness-raising exercises about specific emerging issues, etc. The overall objectives of these workshops and other sessions will be to: (1) identify examples and best practices that could inspire other communities; (2) suggest intervention strategies and concrete lines of action that networks could pursue in order to mitigate or adapt to climate change; and (3) define ways of encouraging inter-network cooperation in order to act as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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