Call by Young People for a New Culture of Peace in the Minds of Women and Men for the 21st Century

Paris, 3 September 2026

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We, 145 youth leaders from 135 Member States and Associate Members, representing diverse regions, contexts and lived experiences across the world, brought together through the UNESCO 14th Youth Forum and on the occasion of the Organization's eightieth anniversary,

Recall that UNESCO was founded on the conviction that, since wars begin in the minds of women and men, it is in those minds that the defences of peace must be constructed — and affirm that this remains an unfinished task, not a historical statement.

Observe that peace today is threatened as much by structural violence, displacement, planetary crisis, and the erosion of trust within and between communities and generations as by armed conflict. Education, sciences, culture, as well as communication and information can either help prevent these threats or, when poorly governed, further undermine the foundations of peace. In an era reshaped by artificial intelligence and rapid technological development, these fields are also increasingly intertwined with digital environments that can amplify mis- and disinformation, polarization and division, while also creating new opportunities for dialogue and learning.

Determined to apply the lessons of our history in order to prevent conflicts by addressing their root causes and to resolve problems through dialogue.

Recognize that social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity are essential components for lasting peace, and that addressing discrimination, exclusion and inequality, while creating meaningful opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and shared cultural life, can strengthen trust within and between communities and generations, as well as contribute to more inclusive, peaceful and resilient societies.

Underline that young people are already taking action — as mediators, researchers, educators, and builders of digital and cultural spaces — yet too often without the recognition, resources or meaningful role in decision-making needed to sustain and strengthen their contributions.

Call on UNESCO, its Member States and their partners to turn these principles into sustained action through the following measures:

1. Embed youth partnership in decision-making systemically and structurally.

Youth participation in peace processes, conflict prevention and reconciliation remains far too limited today. In line with Security Council Resolution 2250, youth must therefore be better recognized as partners in conflict prevention and peacebuilding and included in institutional mechanisms for conflict prevention and mediation.

Within UNESCO, youth engagement should evolve from consultation to meaningful partnership. This means ensuring that opportunities to provide input are complemented by meaningful participation in decision-making: youth representation in National Commissions and Delegations to the General Conference, and in mechanisms such as the SDG 4 Youth & Student Network which ensures that youth are represented in education decision-making bodies alongside ministers. It also requires systematic follow-up: consultations, including this one, should be followed by public reporting on the recommendations adopted, actions taken in response, and the implementation outcomes. UNESCO

should build on the Global Youth Grant Scheme and networks such as the Youth Climate Action Network to connect, resource and give visibility to youth-led initiatives already under way, rather than creating parallel structures, with particular attention to young women and girls, Indigenous youth, youth in African and Afro-descendant communities, youth from Small Island Developing States, as well as youth from marginalized and underserved communities.

2. Treat education as the first line of defence against hatred and division.
Discrimination and hate speech, online and in classrooms, disproportionately affect youth, especially girls and minorities. It can deepen existing divisions within communities, making inclusive and peace-oriented education essential to build understanding, challenge harmful narratives and strengthen social cohesion. Education has a critical role in equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and values needed to navigate differences, challenge harmful narratives and participate constructively in society.

UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, media and information literacy, digital citizenship, social and emotional learning, and the non-violent handling of disagreement should be integrated into school curricula and teacher training as core components of education. This should be complemented by clear guidance to distinguish hate speech from legitimate criticism and disagreement, strengthen civic education and critical-thinking skills, and equip teachers to recognize and address discrimination and hate speech. To this end, national education policies should also include frameworks to protect minors and other vulnerable groups from violent, hateful and manipulative online content. Schools should further promote a "language of peace", equipping young people with the skills to express disagreement constructively, engage in dialogue and navigate differences without hostility or violence. Curricula should also reflect the histories and contributions of African and Afro-descendant people as well as Indigenous peoples on their own terms, including their cultures, knowledge systems and diverse contributions. In crisis and conflict settings, where schools serve not only as places of learning but also as spaces for protection and psychosocial support, UNESCO, Member States and relevant partners should invest in continuity plans, cross-border recognition of learning, and the reopening of schools wherever conditions allow.

3. Turn memory and culture into bridges for mutual understanding, not battlegrounds for division.
The traumas of history cannot be overcome through silence or by forgetting; a peaceful future requires acknowledging the past and learning from it. When history and culture are used to divide, they can entrench mistrust and resentment. Teaching the history of conflict should be evidence-based, open to multiple perspectives, and designed to build empathy rather than resentment, drawing on UNESCO's Programme on Holocaust and Genocide Education and its Memory of the World Programme to keep archives, testimonies and documentary heritage accessible to educators and young people. Youth meaningful participation can be fostered through initiatives such as oral history projects, community mediation, and digital efforts to counter misleading information and harmful narratives. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as Indigenous knowledge systems, require the same level of protection: stronger risk assessment and preparedness before conflict, and genuine accountability for attacks against them during conflict.

Protecting cultural heritage and the memory of the world is not only about preserving the past; it also helps sustain cultural continuity and enables communities and generations to engage with history, different perspectives and identity in ways that foster mutual understanding. Cultural exchange and engagement with different historical memories can create space for mutual understanding, helping communities encounter one another beyond inherited narratives of division, particularly in contexts

shaped by historical conflict. This also highlights the importance of supporting teachers in connecting historical memory to reconciliation and the prevention of future violence.

4. Advance Open Science and access to knowledge as pillars for peace.
Science education and critical thinking can strengthen resilience to information manipulation and polarization, particularly in digital spaces. Open Science complements these efforts by making scientific knowledge more accessible, shareable and inclusive across communities and borders. Yet financial, technological and linguistic barriers continue to limit access to scientific knowledge, especially for researchers and institutions with fewer resources. Open Science should therefore support equitable participation in scientific collaboration, publishing, innovation and knowledge creation through investment in digital infrastructure, connectivity, scientific capacities and science communication. UNESCO's 2023 Open Science Outlook reports that only around one-third of academic articles published between 2000 and 2021 were openly available, rising to around half for articles published in 2021. By strengthening international scientific cooperation, enabling knowledge-sharing across borders and connecting researchers and communities around shared challenges, Open Science can contribute to a culture of peace. This should include advancing the proposed Global Open Science Fund – supporting countries and communities in developing the capacities needed to participate in and benefit from Open Science. Together, these efforts position science and knowledge as drivers of peace, strengthening international cooperation and informed decision-making, which are essential to solving today's complex global challenges.

5. Defend the integrity of information as a condition for peace.
Dis- and misinformation can spread faster than reliable information can be verified or corrected, while an estimated 2.6 billion people remain offline, with access most limited in low-income developing countries. A safe and inclusive information environment requires both closing the digital divide and strengthening the quality and diversity of information available to communities. This includes accessible information, community-based fact-checking, local-language journalism, greater transparency around the systems that shape what information people encounter, as well as stronger protection for journalists, whose killings rose by 38 per cent in 2022–2023 alongside an impunity rate of 85 per cent in 2024. UNESCO should build further on its Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms and the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists, while supporting independent journalism, community media and spaces for young people, particularly those in rural and marginalized communities, to access information and participate in civic life.

6. Govern artificial intelligence to serve peace rather than division.
Artificial Intelligence trained on a narrow range of languages and cultural contexts can reproduce the inequalities it claims to address, and without appropriate safeguards, its use may contribute to bias, surveillance and discrimination, particularly affecting young people. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence requires stronger implementation in practice, including independent and periodic scrutiny of AI systems for bias and disparities in content moderation, ethical impact assessments involving diverse populations, and greater transparency around AI-generated content and the algorithms that shape content recommendations.

As digital spaces have become increasingly central in young people's lives, youth should be meaningfully included in discussions on how these digital spaces and technologies are governed. Young people should be recognized not only as users of AI systems, but as partners in shaping the policies and systems that affect their lives, while supporting them in developing the AI literacy skills needed to

participate meaningfully in these processes. Given the distinct and rapidly evolving impacts of artificial intelligence on young people, UNESCO and its Member States should explore, through the appropriate processes and with the meaningful participation of young people and relevant partners, whether the existing normative framework should be complemented by youth-focused guidance, including, as appropriate, a dedicated standard-setting instrument on youth and artificial intelligence. Any such work should build on and complement UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, with particular attention to young people's rights, safety, well-being, agency and meaningful participation throughout the AI life cycle.

Beyond these safeguards, it is essential to address inequalities in access to AI and its impact on youth employment, while ensuring that its benefits are shared equitably through the development of local skills and capacities.

7. Safeguard education, sciences, culture as well as communication and information for a culture of peace in times of conflict and crisis.

While prevention and early action to address the root causes of conflict and crisis must remain a priority, when crises and conflicts do occur, education, sciences, culture, and communication and information must be protected from disruption. An estimated 272 million children and youth were out of school in 2023, a figure UNESCO itself considers an underestimate due to data gaps in conflict-affected countries and regions. The rights to education and to participate in cultural life, as well as the right to share in scientific advancement and its benefits, must be upheld even in situations of displacement, crisis and conflict. By protecting access to learning, cultural expression, knowledge, and reliable information during crises, UNESCO and Member States can help preserve the connections, cooperation and shared understanding on which peace depends. This should include expanding the UNESCO Qualifications Passport to ensure that displaced students' qualifications and previous studies are recognized across borders, establishing pre-arranged financing through mechanisms such as the SDG4 Emergency Fund, and providing support for young researchers and knowledge holders working under conflict or crisis-related pressures. In times of crisis and conflict, maintaining access to reliable information is equally important to sustaining education, scientific cooperation and cultural life, helping communities remain connected and able to respond to challenging circumstances. Together, these measures help safeguard UNESCO's fields of education, sciences, culture, and communication and information as essential pillars of a culture of peace.

Looking Ahead

These recommendations will only matter if they are followed through with and by youth. We call for transparent follow-up on the conclusions of this consultation, reflecting the standards of transparency we are asking UNESCO to foster in its work. UNESCO's mandate to build the defences of peace in the minds of women and men was written for a different century, but it was written to last. Eighty years on, it falls to this generation, working alongside UNESCO, its Member States and their partners, to carry that mandate into an era of profound societal, environmental and technological change, shaped by planetary boundaries and an increasingly fragmented international landscape. We must ensure that the peace envisioned by UNESCO becomes a peace we truly get to live in.

Together, we call for a new culture of peace for the 21st century: one that we build across generations, make a reality in our time, and pass on to those who come after us.