



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Cultural Heritage and Identity:
an Arab Youth Perspective

1-3 March 2017, Carthage, Beit El Hikma

CONCEPT NOTE

Country of venue	Carthage (Beit El Hikma), Tunisia
Date of the event	1-3 March 2017
Duration of the event	2 ½ days (youth workshops)

BACKGROUND

The social, economic and demographic transitions facing several countries of the Arab region underscore the importance of engaging young women and men more effectively as agents - beneficiaries, partners and actors of change - in rights-based initiatives aimed at promoting their cultural heritage, diversity, inclusion and dialogue. The upheavals witnessed since 2011 have shown the importance of creating conditions in which youth from Arab countries can play a key role in the reform and cultural transformation of their societies.

The civic protection and enhancement of cultural heritage and intellectual tradition is recognized as an untapped resource in this endeavor to build social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and historical awareness as well as to reinforce identities in the face of a complex and intertwined past and present. This can only be leveraged and promoted through local actors' ownership, especially by youth, and through interventions that position culture at the centre of public policies. Cultural heritage in several Arab countries has also been subject in recent years to an unprecedented scale of intentional destruction, marked by iconoclasm and the persecution of targeted communities, notably in Iraq and Syria.

Hence, the very intimate linkage between culture, identity and democracy at the core of this workshop agenda. The challenge is to better engage youth with full participation in contributing to the valorization and communication of their rich and multi-layered national cultural heritage.

In a transition period, it is vital to reaffirm the fundamental role of culture in its wide sense. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) in its article 1 defines cultural diversity as the "common heritage of humanity...this diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind... it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations."

This is particularly relevant in the Arab region, which is a depository of centuries of exchanges among different civilizations, sciences, philosophies, arts, as well as the continuity and resilience of ancient traditions. This has a particular resonance in the context of youth vulnerability, violence and radicalism. While young people constitute about 60% of the total population in the Arab World, the majority are marginalized and unemployed, thus exposed to vulnerability broad range of threats. It is important to engage youth in the promotion of cultural and intellectual heritage, which has great potential shape the future of Arab societies and to create inclusive societies across the region.

UNESCO LAUNCHES A REGIONAL INITIATIVE

This UNESCO initiative aims at supporting youth engagement in cultural heritage protection and peacebuilding in the Arab region. In UNESCO's view, the notion of cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements that represent a unique set of resources for the promotion of respect, intellectual curiosity regarding others, open identities, and mutual understanding among peoples. "It is through culture that man creates works through which he transcends his limitations", stipulates the above-mentioned Declaration. In addition, with 80 World Heritage sites, the Arab region is a unique field of education, sensitization, intercultural dialogues, and innovation for young entrepreneurs. Yet, at a time of pervading violent discourses that justify the destruction of cultural heritage in the name of certain ideologies, it is crucial to promote a critical approach to culture, emphasizing their universal value and the continuous creativity, that characterizes all cultures.

In this context, how can youth be better engaged in reflecting on, and in valorizing their rich, multilayered cultural heritage?

By convening leading partner youth organizations, universities, cities, heritage stakeholders, media and potential donors around possible creative partnerships, this initiative will lead to collaboration that will serve as a basis for an Action Plan and intersectoral programming within UNESCO and cooperation with its partners.

The initiative will offer an unprecedented platform for informed debates and creative thinking between youth organizations, institutional counterparts and academia. It will shed light on good practices and innovative approaches – including those that are youth-led – to engage youth as key actors in articulating culture to democracy; in urban heritage governance; in countering the intentional destruction of heritage sites and cultural diversity and in promoting inclusive and rights-based urban environments.

This workshop is the first step of the initiative, targeting the establishment of a core group to articulate the parameters, and define the possible scope of the overall collaboration.

Overall Objectives

- Identify and build support for innovative regional/national projects aimed at facilitating youth participation in the promotion of heritage, peace, and human rights in the MENA region.
- Harness the potential of cultural and intellectual heritage at the municipal level for building a peaceful and diverse future for youth in the Arab region.

Specific Objectives

- Engage young women and men from partner youth organizations as well as heritage and city managers in a guided conversation about the modalities to further involve youth in cultural and intellectual heritage protection and promotion, and about one's right to take part in cultural life for the positive development of one's communities.
- Stimulate creative thinking and planning for the design of rights-based and youth-centred projects aimed at heritage protection, including in the context of extreme violence.
- Strengthen the engagement and cultural literacy of the youth-led civil society in the protection of cultural heritage as a tool for economic development, peace and social cohesion in the Arab Region.

Overall expected outputs

- Advocacy on Arab youth as an essential driver for change and peacebuilding strengthened.
- Consensus built and vision clarified on how to involve youth in heritage and diversity promotion at local level, translated into a regional Action Plan and pilot projects.
- Potential financial partnerships identified, laying the ground for cooperation in this area, led by UNESCO.
- New youth-designed communication messages to serve as alternative narratives to extremist propaganda created.
- New participatory initiatives to protect cultural heritage in cities outlined.
- New strategies to enhance the role of youth in city-level action to promote inclusion developed, including the partnering with, or revitalization of youth city councils or relevant urban youth representation structures.

Structure of the workshop

Duration:

- Combination of plenary and group work sessions over two days and half, to define the challenges for youth's civic participation in the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, and to formulate and review outcomes and recommendations.

Target beneficiaries:

- Youth, including representatives of youth organizations engaged in cultural heritage promotion/preservation and city-level action to promote inclusion from the Arab region.
- Arab mayors who promote youth participation in their town halls and communities.
- Representatives of heritage and culture institutions from the Arab region and beyond.
- Potential partners (international foundations, international funding programmes, culture-oriented donors), etc.
- Partner media professionals.