



United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Executive Board (UNESCO)

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Purview:

UNESCO was established on 16 November 1945. It is the specialized UN agency responsible for promoting global collaboration through programs that promote education, science and culture. The five major programme areas addressed by UNESCO are education, natural sciences, social and humanitarian science, culture, and communication and information. UNESCO acts as a clearing house for information and assists Member States in developing human

and institutional capacity. UNESCO reports to the Economic and Social Council; it also coordinates with several other UN specialized agencies as well as many intergovernmental organizations outside the UN system. The General Conference meets every two years to determine the policies and the main lines of work of the organization.

Website: <http://en.unesco.org/>

Topics:

Strategy for youth and adult literacy (2020-2025)

There are currently [750 million illiterate people](#) in the world; two-thirds of these are women and almost half live in Asia. Literacy is an essential component of the [right to education](#) and a prerequisite for accessing other human rights. In addition, literacy underpins other United Nations goals, including reducing child mortality, eradicating poverty and promoting gender equality. Despite the efforts of the United Nations and UNESCO, there [are more illiterate adults today](#) than 50 years ago. Illiteracy disproportionately affects women, rural populations, indigenous peoples, minorities, people with disabilities, and refugees and migrants. As part of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), the United Nations has vowed to achieve literacy and numeracy for all youth and a substantial number of adults by 2030.

Since its founding, the United Nations has recognized the importance of advancing global literacy. In the 1950s, UNESCO [conducted research to define the scope of the problem](#), learning that 44% of people worldwide aged 15 or older were illiterate and that a majority of adults in almost half of all countries were illiterate. In 1965, UNESCO convened the [World Conference of Ministers on the Eradication of Illiteracy](#), which described literacy as the most significant cause of human progress and fulfillment. The Declaration also sought to achieve global literacy by 2000. Despite the international community's earnest efforts, the prevalence of illiteracy persisted. During 1990's International Literacy Year, the [International Literacy Conference](#) convened literacy providers and educators from governments, nongovernmental agencies and financing organizations. Subsequently, significantly more attention was paid to global literacy efforts. By the turn of the century, global illiteracy rates [declined to about one in every five](#)

people.

The United Nations has historically served as a platform for setting international development goals in literacy and education. [Millennium Development Goal Two](#) mobilized States to develop the capacity to ensure all children could receive a full course of schooling by 2015. Through UNESCO and the [Education for All \(EFA\)](#) goals, States committed to reduce illiteracy 50 percent by 2015. To advance these ambitious goals, in 2003, the General Assembly declared 2003-2012 to be the [United Nations Literacy Decade \(UNLD\)](#). The UNLD sought to raise public awareness and to make literacy a political priority on both the national and international levels. To complement the UNLD, UNESCO and its specialized organization for adult literacy—the [UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning \(UIL\)](#)—created the [Literacy Initiative for Empowerment \(LIFE\)](#) as a 10-year (2006-2015) strategic framework for the international community to collectively focus on the spread of literacy in the 35 countries that accounted for 85-percent of the world’s illiterate population, the majority of which were women. While the international community achieved some success during the lifespan of the Millennium Development Goals and the UNLD, adult illiteracy only declined 26 percent since 2000, significantly short of the ambitious 50 percent target set at the start of the century. Even so, learnings from the initiatives offered insights for the next international framework to combat illiteracy.

In 2019, UNESCO’s 40th General Conference adopted the [Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy \(2020-2025\)](#) to stress the crucial role of literacy and education in executing the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). While similar past initiatives from UNESCO sought to spread literacy broadly, the Strategy aims to provide global support to the countries and populations that face the world’s most significant literacy challenges. In particular, UNESCO will focus on the 29 countries in the [Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning \(GAL\)](#), which advocates for policies in favor of youth and adult literacy locally and globally. The GAL includes 20 countries with a literacy rate below 50 percent, as well as the [E9 countries](#), which represent over half of earth’s population and 70 percent of the world’s illiterate adults. [Four strategic priority areas](#) underpin the Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy: supporting Member States in developing national literacy policies and strategies, addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups—particularly women and girls, [leveraging digital technologies](#) to expand access and improve learning outcomes and monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills and programs. As momentum around the Strategy continues to generate, UNESCO and Member States should consider what measures must be taken to provide children and adolescents with access to quality education. Furthermore, the Strategy emphasizes the need to provide young people and adults who are out of school with alternative learning opportunities. States should foster enriched literate environments to promote literacy as a lifelong endeavor.

Since the launch of the 2030 Agenda, the international community [has made little progress](#) toward achieving the [Sustainable Development Goal for education](#). The economic fallout from the 2008 global recession continues to impact the amount of international resources given to support literacy programs. Moreover, in countries with lower levels of literacy, the percentage of teachers with basic training has fallen since the start of the century. Continued conflict within and among States may create unsafe environments for learning and displace educators. Some countries are [using technology in innovative ways](#) to maintain educational services during times of conflict. Even though progress toward basic literacy remains an ongoing challenge, UNESCO hopes to give increased attention to advancing digital literacy skills, employing native or mother language-based literacy practices and providing competency training for educators and administrators. Understanding the scope of the challenge ahead, UNESCO must employ tactics to secure the financial, human and technical resources needed—and the strong political commitment of Member States—to achieve these ambitious goals.

Questions to consider:

- How can Member States leverage technology to provide education to children living in countries experiencing conflict?
- What measures should be enacted to combat the disparity between the number of literate men and literate women?
- How can UNESCO and Member States generate momentum to support literacy in the 29 countries with highest numbers of illiterate adults?

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Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change

Climate change poses an ethical dilemma. The [significant time delays](#) associated with climate change mean that most of the worst effects perpetuated by yesterday's pollution will not arise for decades. Some effects cannot be stopped because of the accumulation of past carbon emissions or future, inevitable emissions. A [2019 report](#) from the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) concluded that sea levels have risen 15 centimeters during the 20th century. Today, they are rising more than twice as fast—8.6 millimeters per year—and this rate is accelerating, placing 680 million people in low-lying coastal areas and 65 million people in Small Island Developing States in harm's way. Furthermore, the ocean has absorbed between 20 and 30 percent of human made carbon dioxide emissions since the 1980s, causing ocean acidification that impacts fisheries, aquaculture and tourism. By displacing populations and stressing natural resources, the effects of climate change [could lead to international conflict](#). By altering the world's physical landscape, climate change has already amplified interstate tensions. While climate inaction will certainly [yield catastrophic effects](#), climate adaptation also presents ethical considerations. For example, while a wealthy country may be able to mitigate climate change by fitting structures with air conditioning or building levees and seawalls to control flooding, if they fail to implement policies that reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, impoverished countries who cannot finance expensive infrastructure projects will still bear the brunt of the full force of climate change. Responses to climate change that fail to consider their full ethical ramifications can devastate entire countries and [exacerbate systems of inequity](#).

In 1987, the international community adopted the [Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer](#). Ratified by all 197 Member States today, the Montreal Protocol is considered to be one of the most effective environmental agreements in history, with near-universal ratification resulting in the almost complete elimination of the use of ozone-depleting substances. Because it was created to prevent future calamity, the Montreal Protocol serves as a case example of the [precautionary principle](#) in practice, which reasons that scientific or factual certainty is not necessary to take actions that reduce risk. At the time of its ratification, science had not proven that substances like chlorofluorocarbons contributed to ozone depletion; however, waiting for

scientific certainty may have perpetuated additional harms to the earth's ozone. This work continued in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where Member States began to sign the new [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC [aims to stabilize the concentration of greenhouse gases](#) in the atmosphere to limit the most catastrophic effects of climate change. Its preamble declares that Member States have an ethical duty not to harm others outside of their borders, a constant principle among modern ethical norms.

Although climate change became a topic of more frequent discussion at the United Nations, a specific focus on climate change and ethics is a relatively recent development. Recognizing the compounding scientific, social and humanitarian challenges posed by climate change and the necessity for thoughtful solutions, UNESCO adopted [Resolution 36](#) at its 35th General Conference in Paris in 2009. The resolution called upon the UNESCO Director-General to prepare a report on the merits of and desire for a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change. While the General Conference chose not to immediately pursue the creation of a declaration, UNESCO's [World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology](#) (COMEST) developed and adopted a [Framework of Ethical Principles and Responsibilities for Climate Change Adaptation](#) in 2011. While the Framework highlights principles that will become the cornerstone of the final Declaration, it also details stakeholder responsibilities relevant to climate adaptation. States should include the knowledge of local and indigenous peoples in climate adaptation, empower the victims of climate change and encourage their active participation in the implementation of adaptation efforts, and assist those more vulnerable to the immediate effects of climate change.

At the United Nations, the General Assembly in 2015 adopted the [Paris Agreement](#), which established emission reduction targets and stipulates that States shall collaborate to enhance climate change education, training, and public awareness and participation, supporting a [goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. While the Paris Agreement makes reference to some ethical principles—like the principles of equity and sustainable development—it is a political declaration rather than an ethical declaration, [using political pressure](#) to mobilize States toward addressing climate change. In 2017, UNESCO adopted the [Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change](#). The Declaration details the moral premises underlying six ethical principles for responding and adapting to climate change: prevention of harm, the precautionary principle, equity and justice, sustainable development, solidarity, and scientific knowledge and integrity in decision making. The Declaration further explains that unless ethical principles become the guiding lens for climate action, climate change and adaptation measures could create irreparable damage and

injustice, especially in vulnerable countries that are already enduring the effects of climate change. In contrast to other conventions created by the United Nations, such as the Montreal Protocol or the UNFCCC, the Declaration is designed to be a framework for behavior by both State and non-State actors. Consequently, the Declaration may advance coordinated action among civil society organizations, academics and local communities as they seek to raise educational awareness and international cooperation on climate change.

Addressing climate change through the lens of ethics is a crucial challenge for the international community. Even so, four years after the signing of the Paris Agreement, only two countries are [meeting their climate pledges](#), and the Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change has struggled to gain traction as well. UNESCO [convened a panel](#) in 2019 at the [25th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC](#) in Madrid, Spain, where [participants highlighted](#) that Member States and nongovernmental organizations have failed to identify or apply ethical principles when evaluating policies that bear environmental implications, resorting instead to economic arguments. The 2018–2021 [Strategy for Action on Climate Change](#) directs UNESCO to support Member States with developing and implementing climate change education and public awareness programs to empower people and States to adopt sustainable lifestyles. Furthermore, work remains to include promoting interdisciplinary and scientific knowledge on issues associated with climate mitigation and adaptation, and recognizing the role that cultural knowledge and diversity play as crucial social drivers for implementing the resilience measures required in order to respond to climate change. In 2018, UNESCO published its [Report on Water Ethics: Ocean, Freshwater Coastal Areas](#), which recommends the creation of guiding principles to ethically manage earth's water resources. Adapting to climate change in an ethical and just manner will prove demanding, but the consequences of failure are dire, making the work of UNESCO ever more important in securing international cooperation to build a more sustainable and prosperous future.

Questions to Consider:

- How can States incorporate the Declaration's six ethical principles into policy at the national level?
- What should UNESCO do to instill ethical principles in nongovernmental and civil society organizations and the private sector?
- What measures can UNESCO take to support the inclusion of ethics, as well as scientific and cultural knowledge, in global efforts to address climate change?

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