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UNESCO and It's Relevance in Contemporary World

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Abstract: ***This paper examines the relevance of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in addressing contemporary global challenges. It discusses UNESCO's contributions to international peace, educational development, cultural heritage protection, scientific cooperation, freedom of expression, and ethical governance of artificial intelligence. Particular attention is given to the organization's role in protecting cultural identity during armed conflicts, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening international collaboration. The discussion also considers challenges involving political disagreements, financial limitations, institutional effectiveness, and limited enforcement authority. The paper argues that UNESCO remains an important institution for international cooperation despite these constraints. It concludes by emphasizing the need for stronger educational inclusion, scientific partnerships, cultural preservation, digital literacy, and institutional accountability to improve UNESCO's effectiveness in the contemporary world.***

Keywords: UNESCO, Global Governance, Cultural Heritage, International Cooperation, Sustainable Development

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations) can be described as a global group that functions to build peace by helping countries to share their knowledge, protect their historical legacies and provide education. UNESCO as an international organization can be defined as world's caretaker for culture, science and learning. UNESCO was founded on November 16, 1945 in London United Kingdom, with it's constitution came into effect on November 4, 1946. The organization has its headquarters in Paris, France and was established to advance peace and security through international collaboration in education, Science and culture. The UNESCO can be described as a specialized agency of the United Nations with the aim of promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture. It has 194 member states and 12 associate members along with partners in the non-governmental and primary sector. The organization has 53 regional field office and 199 national commissions. It is an autonomous international organization. UNESCO which has founded in 1945, as a successor to the League of Nations's International committee on Intellectual Cooperation. UNESCO's mission has been shaped by the historic events of World War 2, that is to establish peace, human rights and sustainable development, by encouraging collaboration and dialogue among nations. UNESCO has been operating for 80 years.

The UNESCO constitution recognizes that the prevention of conflict, and the establishment of peace, begins with the political and economic arrangements of government, but also 'the intellectual moral solidarity of mankind.'

The main purpose of UNESCO according to article 1 of it's constitution is to play a key role in promotion of international peace and security by encouraging peaceful education and collaboration among nations, also to ensure universal respect for justice, Rule of Law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination on religion on the grounds of race, language or religion in accordance to the charter of the United Nations.

It is in this context, UNESCO has been following functions as mentioned in Article 2 of its Constitution.

a) To promote mutual understanding among people through mass Communication and recommend international agreement to encourage free flow of ideas.
b) To encourage popular education and the spread of culture by:
   - Collaborating with Members in order to develop and promote educational programs and activities.
   - Encouraging collaboration to promote equal educational opportunity without any discrimination.
   - Providing suggestion on different educational methods in order to prepare children for "responsibilities of freedom".
c) Maintain, increase and propagate knowledge by:
   - Conservation of world's heritage, that is old books, art, monuments, and suggesting necessary international measures and principles.
   - Fostering intellectual co-operation, including the exchange of people of people and materials in education, science and culture.
   - Paring the way for co-operation in order to provide global access to the published materials.

Objectively speaking in an era of AI, climate crisis and socio-cultural wars, UNESCO strives to establish peace in minds of people irrespective of any discrimination and has become more important and immediate than ever. Although UNESCO was established in 1945 with a simple idea of establishing idea and preserving culture but after prolonged 80 years in 2026, UNESCO does not command armies or regulate trade. However, UNESCO's contribution in education, culture, science and communication makes it Central to the biggest challenges of present era that is misinformation, identity conflicts, climate change and the ethics of new technology UNESCO, at present should take a buffer position in relation to those factors that arose at the turn of 20th -21st centuries amid the cultural demands of both Northern and Southern World or the Western and the eastern world.

Now question arises 'Why UNESCO matters today?'

1) Protecting, preserving and exchange of culture as a Tool of Peace. To explain, it is with 1199 world Heritage sites across 168 countries, UNESCO acts a global custodian of humanity's shared history. In the present 21st century, culture is the main target in conflict. Example: From Palmyra to Ukraine where 400+ cultural sites have been damaged, UNESCO aims at their reconstruction. Example: India's 34 sites, including the recent examples of Santiniketan and the inclusive of Durga Puja and Yoga show how culture is used as a soft power in international relations.
2) Setting Global Rules for AI and Information: The biggest battlefield in 2026 is the digital world. It was a prelude that UNESCO led the 2023 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI that is the first global agreement signed by 194 states. Today, it shapes how AI is used in education, reporting and journalism and in providing public services in order to curb trials. Moreover, UNESCO runs the World Press Freedom Day and trains journalists in media literacy to counter deep takes and misinformation that is Northern UN organization combines education along with ethics and communication in such an empirical manner.
3) UNESCO strives to Link Education and Climate Action: In this context, UNESCO is driving SDG4 program to promote Quality education, Post Covid, 250 million children remained out of school. The global Education Monitoring Report of UNESCO pushes for inclusive, comprehensive and technology enabled learning. At the same time, UNESCO connects education to climate through the policy of "Education for Sustainable Development". Example: In this context UNESCO's greening curriculum in more than 80 countries and prioritizing climate threatened sites like the Great Barrier Reef and Sundarbans as in grave danger in order to compel government for immediate action.
4) Science for Common Goods: Through programs like the International Hydrological Programs and the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System, UNESCO provides scientific data that no tingle country can produce or thrive alone. This is essential for water security, marine health and address issues like natural disaster management that do not remain confine within international boundaries.
5) As a lead advocate for education, it ensures a comprehensive access to learning, particularly during any emergency or displacement that is, UNESCO promotes life-long learning globally.
6) Science and Sustainability: UNESCO co-ordinates international scientific programs for example; Oceanography. It bridges the digital divide and ensures the ethical use of technology and AI.
7) Freedom of Expression: It defends the safety of media personnels and promotes press freedom Worldwide.

The 4 pillars of UNESCO, as originally conceptualized in the Delor's Report are basic principles of lifelong learning:

1) Learning to know: Developing the instruments for understanding, acquiring knowledge and learning how to learn.
2) Learning to do: Acquiring practical, vocational and occupational skills to act creatively in one's environment.
3) Learning to live together live together that is fostering empathy, tolerance and peaceful cooperation with others in an interconnected world.
4) Learning to be: Developing individual's full personality, judgement and sense of responsibility.

UNESCO's relevance in contemporary global politics can be seen in its role as the United Nation's intellectual agency shaping "soft power" and global governance. By establishing normative standards in education, science and culture it pacifies geo-political tensions, promotes human rights, and establishes ethical borders for emerging technologies like AI.

1) The organization operates across several core pillars of International Relations:
   - Normative Power and Technology Ethics: It is in this context that UNESCO establishes global standards, example: the Recommendation of Ethics of AI, providing a multi-lateral Framework to govern technology and to prevent algorithmic bias.
   - Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage: Positioning and protecting World Heritage sites which serves as a forum of cultural diplomacy, and also preventing the destruction of historical identities during conflict and promoting international co-operation.
   - Informative and Integrity: Amid rising disinformation and digital polarization UNESCO talks of press freedom worldwide.
   - Scientific Collaboration: UNESCO leads global scientific initiatives, coordinating trans-boundary projects like water security and marine sciences to promote environmental multi literalism.
   - Education for Global Citizenship: By uploading global curriculum, it promotes democratic values, human rights, and sustainable development.
2) UNESCO does not have any peacekeeping troops. Its job in war zones is to protect what armies target first, that is people's identity, knowledge and truth.
   - It identifies, monitor and safeguard World heritage sites, museums, archives and religious places during War by Satellite monitoring, "No Strike Lists" shared with armies and emergency grants, 3D Scanning. Example: In 2024-26 in Ukraine, UNESCO verified damage to 400+ cultural sites and gave training to first responders to evacuate artifacts from museums. In Gaza, it recorded damage to historic mosques, churches and libraries.
   - Rebuild and Promote "Culture for Peace": After ceasefire, UNESCO leads reconstruction that is funding and technical expertise to rebuild schools, libraries, historical sites, by using local labour, thereby generating employment at the grassroot level which later helps the war-stricken communities to heal. Example: Reconstruction of Mosul's Al-Noun Mosque in Iraq with UAE, also reviving Aleppo's old city in Syria i.e. promoting the idea that if people rebuild together, they do not see each other as enemies.
   - To protect Education by building temporary learning spaces, distributing textbooks, provide training to teachers and running the UN plan of Action on Safety of Journalists. Example:- In 2026 in Sudan and DRC, UNESCO had setup radio schools for displaced children. It also investigates attacks on press

personnel and publishes an annual "Impunity Report" to pressurize the governments.
- Fight mis-information and Hate speech. Example: In Sahel and Myanmar, UNESCO provides training to help the local media to report without igniting ethnic violence. It's AI ethics guidelines are used to flag AI generated war propaganda.

3) Legal Tools UNESCO Uses:
   - 1954 Hague Convention: Protects cultural property during armed conflict. 133 Country signed.
   - Blue Sheild: Like Red Cross but for Culture. Marks heritage sites to protect them from bombing.
   - World Heritage "In Danger "List – Puts political pressure on working parties. Example: Old city of Jerusalem, Historic Areas of Odessa.
4) Limitations:
   - No enforcement power – Can name and shame but can't stop airstrikes.
   - Access Problems- Often can't enter active war zones without Government/ Army's permission.
   - Underfunded- Emergency Heritage fund is US$10 Million which is tiny compared to excessive damage caused in war.
5) Why This matters in 2026?
   - Modern Wars target memory. ISIS blew up Palmyra to erase history. Russia targeted Ukrainian Museums to erase identity. Israel-Gaza war saw libraries and Archives hit.
   - UNESCO logic: If you protect what people learn and what they remember, you protect the possibility of peace after the war. That is why it's role has shifted from "Heritage Tourism" to "Heritage as Humanitarian aid".
6) Major Challenges faced by UNESCO in preserving its contemporary relevance:
   - Political Politicization: Deep division between Western Nations and the global south paralyzes consensus.
   - Funding Stability: Historic withdrawls and returns of major member states like the US has created a Budget crisis.
   - Geopolitical Bias: Accusations of politicized decision making regarding Middle Eastern and heritage sites.
   - Enforcement Limits: Lacks legal authority or military power to stop the destruction in active war zones.
7) Core Criticism:
   - Bureaucratic Inefficiency: Slow Response time and heavy administrative bloat that dilute proper impacts.
   - Symbolic vs Practical impacts: - that focuses heavily on declarations and resolutions rather than on the ground changes.

To conclude: UNESCO can strengthen its relevance in the contemporary world by responding effectively to changing global conditions. UNESCO's work can be strengthened in several areas.

- Improving educational inclusions i.e. greater attention should be given to disadvantaged communities, eradication of educational inequality & greater digital access.
- Strengthen International Scientific Co-operation. UNESCO should facilitate Countries expanding knowledge sharing and have collaborative research on climate change, bio-diversity, Oceans etc.
- UNESCO should focus on improving heritage protections and have conservations program integrating with local communities.
- UNESCO should contribute facilitating international dialogues on Artificial Intelligence, Digital inequality, privacy and human rights for the advancement of ethical Technology Governance
- Strengthen media and information Literacy. Should help people to identify unreliable information.
- Improve implementation and accountability in Various Governments and partner institutions.
- Encourage inclusive International Co-operations by allowing Developing Countries to have meaningful contributions to the formation of International Standadrds.

These above measures could help UNESCO adopt its traditional mandate and overcome the challenges of the 21st Country.