# The idea of international solidarity at UNESCO is dwingling

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… ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of [Hu]mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war;…UNESCO (1946)

**Abstract**

UNESCO's role to building solidarity, peace and security internationally seems to be threatened and weakened. In 1946, UNESCO made a social contract to use culture, education and science as a tool for buiding international solidarity, peace and security. Its trajectory presents challenges related to vopice, representation, power and hegemony which often result in conflict in most parts of the globe. For instance, the recent acceptance of Palestine to UNESCO has increased tensions amongst states because of Palestine's positioning in global peace processes. This research surfaces some of these challenges and recomends further research on how to ensure the independents of UNESCO in fulfilling its mandate.
**Key words:** Palestine, UNESCO, International solidarity, Peace, Security

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation [UNESCO] was established in 1945 primarily to build international solidarity and peace amongst nations of the world (UNESCO, 2015). Most of these nations were extremely fragile after the first and second world wars with major devastations of memorial and cultural sites (UNESCO, 2015) (Joll, 1984) (Winter, 1995) (Vallin, Meslé, Adamets, & Pyrozhkov, 2012). Essentially, UNESCO is one of the many international initiatives of post war attempts to bring peace and solidarity in the world. Some scholars argue that UNESCO must be seen as an initiative not just for peace building but for security as well by promoting collaboration amongst member states in the areas of education, science and culture (Blanchfield & Browne, 2013). UNESCOs approach to achieving international solidarity, peace building and security is by investing in cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue through the promotion and protection of educational, scientific and cultural rights across the globe (UNESCO, 2009). The focus of this essay is primarily on UNESCOs approach to cultural rights and solidarity challenges internationally. The next section discusses this approach.

## 2. UNESCO's approach to cultural rights

### 2.1. UNESCO and cultural rights
The constitution of UNESCO declares unambiguously that:
> The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal *respect for justice,* … for *the human rights* and *fundamental freedoms* which are affirmed for the peoples of the world….(UNESCO, 1945).

The commitment is that these principles shall be realized amongst other things by giving fresh impulse to … the spread of culture [between and amongst member countries](UNESCO, 1945).
Following this commitment, UNESCO developed various instruments that are geared towards the realization, promotion and protection of cultural rights in the world. Initially, the idea began with an agreement amongst states to allow the circulation of visual and auditory materials between countries (UNESCO, 1948), and thereafter various agreements, conventions and declarations followed. These included the importation of … cultural materials (UNESCO, 1950), copyright protection (UNESCO, 1952;1971) protection of cultural property during armed conflict (UNESCO, 1954), principles on archaeological excavations (UNESCO, 1956), free access to museums (UNESCO, 1960), safeguarding the beauty and character of landscapes and sites (UNESCO, 1962), prevention of illicit import, export and

transfer of ownership of cultural property (UNESCO, 1964; 1970), international cultural cooperation (UNESCO, 1966), protection of world cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1972), avoidance of taxation of copyright royalties (UNESCO, 1979), cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2001), protecting intentional destruction of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003), safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003), protection and promotion of diverse cultural expressions (UNESCO, 2005) just to mention a few.

All these legal and policy developments were driven by one goal, that of building international solidarity, peace and security through the collaborative use of culture. This is such a gigantic task given that culture is so fragile in that it touches on people's ways of life that are embedded in their often localized beliefs and ritualistic systems that can be hard to internationalize in real terms. It seems though that the work of UNESCO has been atleast until 2003, focused on what Singh (2010) calls 'cultural industries' which are those that include arts and creative sectors that encompass, but are not limited to, fine and performing arts, cultural heritage, publishing, film, television, music, photography, design, and cultural tourism. It was only in 2003 that the language of 'intangible culture' emerged at UNESCO which includes oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe (UNESCO, 2003).

### 2.2. UNESCOs approach: Building international solidarity, peace and security through culture
It is clear that UNESCO approaches cultural rights from an angle of international solidarity, peace and security building. A critical question is whether that approach is working or not. In engaging with this question, I would like to point out some of the issues that are raised by Singh (2010) related to power and its dynamics in international policy. Secondly, I would like to engage with some of the institutional challenges that have been a part of UNESCO and persist even today which have an impact on its ability to forge solidarity, peace and security amongst member states in the name of cultural diversity and expressions. I will then show how some of these institutional challenges are connected to the politics of power. I will start with the challenge of voice and representation in the next section.

### 2.2.1. Voice and Representation in cultural solidarity building
The importance of voice in international solidarity building is pointed out very well by Champenois (2010) on issues related to the practice of female genital mutilation in Africa. It questions the fact of who must speak and narrate a cultural experience that is admittedly considered harmful to women and daughters of Africa (Champenois, 2010). The essence is: whose voice matters? Can non-African feminists claim to speak and narrate an experience that is African? In responding to these essences, Champenois (2010) problematizes non-African representations and narrations of African experiences. Even though, feminists all over the world seem unified on the fight to end harmful cultural violence against women and girl children, non-African feminists cannot speak or narrate an African woman's cultural experience as if it was their own because such a narrative will always bring out the 'other' by another (Champenois, 2010) and therefore sensitive. Such sensitivity is invoked as a consequence of coloniality against any particular hegemony that seeks to aggressively or otherwise impose its cultural superiority on the formerly colonised (Mulcahy, 2010).

It is common in the global arena that former colonies will seek ways to claim their autonomy and independence from dominant forces. Sovereign cultural identity building is particularly critical for them since the pervasiveness of cultural globalization, synonymous with Americanized values, makes the retention of national cultural identity a difficult issue even for countries such as France and Canada, which were the principal sponsors of the UNESCO Declaration on the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Mulcahy, 2010). Sceptics will always remind us that the first objective of colonialism is political domination and its second objective is to make possible the exploitation of the colonized (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012) and this scepticism is particularly compelling in international cultural narratives and representations. Infact, most postcolonial scholars insist that 'colonialism is not dead' (Alemazung, 2010); it has just taken different names and faces like globalisation, internationalisation, neoliberalism and modernisation amongst many others. I now move to some of the institutional challenges in the following section.

### 2.2.2. Institutional and political hegemony in cultural solidarity building
Singh (2011) details some of the institutional challenges that UNESCO experienced during its trajectory over the years. I would like to isolate those related to the United States at UNESCO. Blanchfield & Browne (2013) express in a recent report to the US congress that the United States is planning to suspend its funding support to UNESCO due to the admission of Palestine membership to UNESCO (UN-News-Centre, 2011). This has serious institutional repercussions for UNESCO because their budget just like that of most

UN mechanisms relies entirely on voluntary contributions from member countries (Global-Policy-Forum). As a result, UNESCO has taken a decision to cut its budget for all programs by 15% as it is evident that the suspension of the US and Israel contributions has reduced the entire UNESCO budget by 25% (Federal-Ministry-of-Education-and-Research, 2015). The US contribution alone is estimated at 22% of UNESCOs budget per fiscal year, ranging between $73 million and $84 million (Blanchfield & Browne, 2013). This is not the first time that the US has threatened UNESCOs functions. In 1984, the US officially withdrew its participation to UNESCO for reasons that are almost similar to why they are once again suspending their funding to UNESCO. Blanchfield & Browne (2013) explain that the US remains concerned about the politicization of UNESCO.

It is important at this stage to make connections between the scenarios above and power and engage briefly with the politics of money. Ancient wisdom suggests that money and power perform similar social functions (Baldwin, 1971), which is to dominate and control. Power [and money] is a very delicate and dangerous property of human beings; it can build or destroy bonds including political bonds (Vilakazi & Dinbabo, 2014). In this instance then, money as power can be considered to be what others call structural power. I would like to invoke Kirshner's concept of structural power to best define the power game that the US is playing at UNESCO. There are three kinds of money power namely: currency manipulation, monetary dependency and systemic disruption where the latter is defined as a kind of power that causes temporary and/or permanent disruptions in the functions of an institution (Kirshner, 2005). My postulation is that the US is exerting systemic disruptive power over UNESCO by employing its 'dollar primacy'(Kirshner, 2008) to the institution. It is obvious that UNESCO is affected, demonstrated by its recent significant budgetary cuts of about 15% for all its programs. The membership of Palestine is certainly going to deepen the challenge further given reservations of some states regarding the political positioning of Palestine in global peace building. Lastly, I explore challenges related to culture and money.

### 2.2.3.   Cultural or commercial solidarity?

Singh (2007) poses a question: 'is it culture or commerce? This is a question that is asked with specific reference to the relationship between developed and developing nations involved in the international cultural exchange at UNESCO, a relationship that remains troubled, even as UNESCO is attempting to build international cultural solidarity. Dependency theorists depict it as a skewed relationship between the 'core' and the 'periphery' where power sits with the core (developed countries) like the US and others (Tansey & Hayman, 1994). Frank (1966) the father of dependency theory actually thinks that the major challenge in the troubled relations between the core and the periphery is capitalism. Various scholars argue that the politics of dominance and dependency continue to mark relations between countries even in international cultural exchanges.

Postcolonial theory suggests that the nation-building project in postcolonial states is about the creation of an authentic culture to replace that imposed by the colonial power (Mulcahy, 2010). So, culture becomes a localised and national resource that is highly valued and protected in such instances. In some instances, where fragile and vulnerable post conflict countries, mostly third world have demonstrated efforts for international cultural solidarity, the odds proved to be highly skewed. Brianso (2010) for instance contests the fact that in 2009, the World Heritage List presented Europe and North America as having the strongest concentration of registered sites and representation of natural and cultural diversity with 'universal and exceptional value'. The contestation here is that this was an uneven representation and goes against the spirit of the Convention of on the protection of World cultural and natural heritage of 1972 (UNESCO, 1972). It was skewed for the financial benefit of Europe and the US.

Similar kinds of trends were experienced in most developing countries in the 80s and 90s where the proliferation of US cultural mediums (Hollywood, MacDonaldisation) dominated creative cultural markets ranging from clothing, advertising, food, television, films and consumerism although the rise of competitive kinds like Bollywood and Nollywood continue to disrupt that cultural hegemony. The central aspect to this is 'money' and power. It is about whose culture sells? It is not really about solidarity building in most cases. So, the internationalisation of cultural solidarity continues to raise more questions than answers. The one critical question being 'Can a careful and balanced scrutiny of cultural claims contribute to a constructive 'dialogue among civilizations'? (UN-General-Assembly, 2001). Well, my conclusion is that the dialogue continues and only time will tell. UNESCOs role is clearly at stake to achieve a gigantic task of building international solidarity amidst some of the challenges that I have briefly highlighted.


## 3. Recommendations

In view of the challenges highlighted above, it is recommended that further research be conducted to look at the possibility of running UNESCO as an independent institution that is autonomous from member states

hegemonic and power-ful influences as it is the case with the US. This is to ensure that the benefit of international cultural exchange and solidrity isnot for the benefit of few rich nations but for all countries of the world and is balanced compared to the status quo that this essay has briefly surfaced.

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