

**Special Rapporteur on the right to education**

**Farida Shaheed**

**Official Visit to UNESCO**

**Paris. 20 January 2023.**

I want to thank UNESCO for inviting me for this official visit and I express my gratitude for the warm welcome, hospitality and openness of the exchanges.

My visit took place this week and I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of all sectors, with a focus on the right to education. The purpose of my visit was to collect information and discuss issues related to the realization of the human right to education as well as to have discussions on progress made and remaining challenges in this regard. Together, we explored the areas for potential synergies, complementarities and future collaborations between UNESCO and my mandate. I also had discussions with civil society, including the Chair of the International Conference of NGOs and of the UNESCO-NGO Liaison Committee. I look forward to continuing exchanges and engagement, including with UNESCO Institutes.

I appreciate that the UNESCO Commission on the Futures of Education has sparked a much-needed discussion on paradigm shifts in how education is conceptualized, realized and assessed in a way that addresses past failures, new realities and future needs. I also appreciate the Evolving Right to Education Initiative, launched by the Education Sector of UNESCO, proposing a holistic approach to education in a rapidly changing world. I agree that education cannot be addressed in isolation from specific economic, social and cultural dynamics and contexts in which it is embedded. The right to education must be understood as a right to life-long learning. Beyond issues of availability and access, we must ensure acceptability and adaptability. This implies ensuring quality, relevant content, nurturing a sense of global citizenship, as well as respect for diversity, inclusion, and human rights.

The Education Policy Section has picked up essential aspects such as individual and collective well-being; the interlinkages between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; ensuring relevant and effective education; early childhood care and education; financing for life-long learning; and legal frameworks. I appreciate that the Education Policy Section, which includes a dedicated team working on the right to education, adopts a holistic approach to education and works with the various departments and sectors of UNESCO.

I was impressed by the energy and commitment of dedicated teams across the board, working on important issues such as teachers, technologies and artificial intelligence, education in emergencies, and gender inclusiveness. All sectors of UNESCO have education/learning components, opening avenues for synergies and therefore more comprehensive reinforcement of the right to education from different perspectives. This includes addressing challenges such as the respect due to scientific/academic freedoms, artistic and scientific education, access to information, co-creation of knowledge and the use of technologies in education.

I welcome ongoing efforts to ensure that UNESCO standard-setting instruments are revisited/revised in the light of today’s complexities and new challenges.

UNESCO is the lead UN Agency in matters of education, including for coordinating work to reach SDG 4 targets. To that effect, it needs strong and effective support from its Member States, in particular through core-funding.

The private sector is an increasing player in the field of education for which there are different models. It is important to have discussions on education for all with the private sector. I have concerns however that this may carry a risk of undue influence for the education agenda, that sometimes is not immediately obvious. I have discussed safeguards that are in place to mitigate such risks. Civil society organizations and experts have also expressed a concern that this is leading to a disproportionate voice of the private sector in matters relating to education.

UNESCO provides quality high-level technical assistance to Member States. In terms of national financing of education, I believe that it is important that UNESCO effectively support Member States in discussions with development banks and private sector, especially the commercial entities. Agreements should be respectful of all aspects of the right to education, including this being the primary responsibility of the State. In our post-Covid era, we must also ensure that the cost of the digitalization of education is not borne by children and other learners through data-mining and hidden expenses.

I am very pleased that UNESCO has taken the lead on the issue of early childhood care and education - ECCE. I will be happy to participate with all other stakeholders in discussions on how to reinforce legal obligations in this regard, as well as for other areas.

UNESCO, being the guardian of important instruments in the field of education, has its own mechanisms for assessing progress in implementation. An important further step would be to reinforce the voice of civil society, academics and other stakeholders in assessments and review processes, and to adopt a country approach.

I was very pleased at the alignment of thinking between my mandate and UNESCO on the content, the approach to and concerns regarding the right to education and learning. The discussions on how to systematize and reinforce collaboration between my mandate and various sectors and units of UNESCO were very fruitful, and I look forward to future collaboration, including around key issues of concern.

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