
Why UNESCO is a Critical Tool for Twenty-First Century Diplomacy

AMBASSADOR DAVID T. KILLION

FLETCHER FORUM: *Many organizations within the United Nations system address education as a key component of international development. What specific role does UNESCO play?*

AMBASSADOR KILLION: It is true that there are several players in the field of global education, but it's not quite as chaotic as it might appear. The different players agree on the overall goals—for example, completion of primary school—and each organization within the UN system brings a slightly different focus and expertise to the table.

UNESCO is a key piece of the UN puzzle. By concentrating on capacity building, policy implementation, and promotion of best practices at the country level, it advances the UN's goal of strengthening country capacity to deliver effective, equitable and inclusive education. UNESCO also places a particular emphasis on helping countries protect those at risk of social exclusion. Issues of inclusion have similar themes across the globe, but play out differently in each country. UNESCO plays a critical role in building relationships with education ministries and other stakeholders to

Ambassador David T. Killion *was nominated as U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the rank of Ambassador on June 25, 2009 by President Obama and was sworn into office on August 12, 2009. Since his appointment, Ambassador Killion has worked tirelessly to advance U.S. national interests at UNESCO and to help the organization to fulfill its mandate of building peace, eradicating poverty, and achieving sustainable development solutions for today's global challenges. Prior to his appointment, Ambassador Killion served as a Senior Professional Staff Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and was the Committee's top expert on International Organizations and State Department Operations.*

identify the barriers and opportunities for inclusion, which is essential to ensuring the right to education.

UNESCO also brings a unique perspective to education because of its joint focus on peace and sustainable development. The organization is preparing students to take on twenty-first century problems—from climate change to extremism—by building their critical thinking skills and teaching them the value of freedom and tolerance.

FLETCHER FORUM: *UNESCO's Education Sector aims to tackle a very broad range of education issues, from literacy to post-conflict education to incorporating information communication technologies (ICT) in the classroom. What specific education issues does the U.S. Mission prioritize and why?*

We try to take a holistic view and support initiatives that can impact a whole range of education issues. Take Open Educational Resources (OERs), for instance. The term “Open Educational Resources,” coined at UNESCO in 2002, refers to teaching, learning, or research materials that have been released under an intellectual property license that allows for their free use and repurposing by others. The U.S. Mission has made it a priority to support UNESCO’s work in OERs because they have the potential to transform global education by dramatically increasing access to quality educational materials not only for students in the U.S., but also for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and for children in South Sudan.

The U.S. Mission also sees girls’ and women’s education as a critical priority because it is connected to so many other education and social issues. You cannot address literacy, for example, without putting a special

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..... focus on girls’ and women’s education because two-thirds of the 775 million people that lack basic literacy skills are women. Literate women are more likely to send their children to school, especially their daughters. They are also more likely to attain a higher socio-economic status and to raise healthier children. Women and girls are central to the future of global education, which is why we have worked to support UNESCO’s work in this area, including through the Global Partnership for Girls’ and Women’s Education and the U.S.-funded report “From Access to Equality: Empowering Girls and Women through Literacy and Secondary Education.”

Finally, we recognize UNESCO's value in cultivating peace and countering extremism through education, so we have initiated or supported programs that aim to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust are not forgotten or repeated, to combat racism and discrimination among youths, and to prevent homophobic bullying in schools.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited UNESCO in 2011 to help kick off "The Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education," a new public-private initiative designed to strengthen educational opportunities for girls and women around the globe. Has this public-private partnership been successful thus far?*

KILLION: The Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education has definitely been a highlight of my tenure as Ambassador. The Partnership is a perfect example of how public-private partnerships can be used to address our most pressing educational challenges. Currently, three companies are working within the framework of the Partnership to empower girls and women in five African countries: the GEMS Foundation in Kenya and Lesotho, the Packard Foundation in Ethiopia and Tanzania, and Procter & Gamble (P&G) in Senegal.

The Procter & Gamble-funded example is particularly compelling. P&G partnered with UNESCO to develop a special cause-related marketing campaign for girls' education. The "Always" marketing campaign features the UNESCO logo on certain packs of Always feminine products sold in France and a few other pilot countries. Each time a pack is purchased, Always donates a portion of the proceeds to help fund UNESCO education campaigns in Senegal. The campaign has been wildly successful, boosting sales for P&G and generating significant funds for UNESCO. These funds have allowed the organization to create close to 200 new classrooms, train 100 literacy teachers, and reach 10,000 Senegalese girls and women. But it's really just the beginning because the Always-UNESCO campaign is being extended to Eastern Europe and potentially Brazil, China and the United States. The additional revenue generated will be used to fund new girls' education projects in Africa, starting in Kenya. The Procter & Gamble initiative has prompted other American companies to consider joining the Partnership, so I hope we will see it expand this year.

The Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education reflects the changing landscape of development assistance, which is shifting away from a Westphalian state-centric model where governments and intergovernmental organizations are the only actors that count. The reality is that official development aid from developed countries is falling, and is likely

to stagnate in Least Developed Countries. However, non-state actors, including private companies, are ready and able to play a more important role in international development.

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Regarding girls' and women's education, the private sector understands that educating girls generates economic growth and development, which in turn creates new markets. Private companies are ready to invest not just resources, but also ideas, energy, and technology to educate women and girls. But they cannot go it alone if they want to have large-scale impact, which is why they want to work with UNESCO. UNESCO connects them to education ministries and experts, allowing them to fine tune their projects and then scale them up for maximum impact.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In September 2012, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the "Global Education First" initiative in order to invigorate the global movement for education. Does "Global Education First" challenge UNESCO's education mandate? How does the new initiative reflect on the progress or inertia of the education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) intended to be completed by 2015?*

KILLION: The Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) does not challenge UNESCO's mandate in any way. In fact, it strengthens UNESCO's agenda by giving it visibility at the highest levels of the UN system. In recognition of its lead role in education, UNESCO's Director-General Irina Bokova was selected to serve as the Executive Secretary of the GEFI Steering Committee.

GEFI provides a platform to strengthen education advocacy efforts that are already underway and to ensure that education is a top priority on national agendas. It is important to see that the Global Education First Initiative was designed to highlight effective approaches and encourage action. It was created to help us make that last big push towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals but also look toward the future, post-2015.

FLETCHER FORUM: *"Education for All" (EFA), a global initiative established in 2000 at the World Economic Forum, is also set to conclude in 2015. EFA seeks to provide quality education for children, youth, and adults around the world. Yet, UNESCO reports suggest that at the current rate of progress,*

most African countries will not reach the EFA goals by 2015. Are these broad goals regarding education ever achievable, given the range of contexts in which the programs are implemented? If so, what should be done now in order to get closer to achieving the EFA goals by 2015?

KILLION: There are two ways to look at the objectives of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. If we look at them in terms of measurable outcomes, there is no doubt that we are at risk of not achieving the targets that were set. But we can also view them as aspirational, as initiatives that inspired dialogue, kick-started action, and resulted in real progress. It is easy to see 2015 as an end, but in doing so we remove the aspiration and risk giving in to disillusionment and complacency. Instead, we need to think of 2015 in terms of progress along a trajectory and rededicate ourselves to another set of goals post-2015.

Of course, EFA has taught us some valuable lessons about global education. Perhaps the most valuable lesson is that achieving equitable education is an ongoing process, and one that requires constant focus and persistence by every country in the world, including developed countries. EFA has also shown us the value of exchanging information and ideas. This exchange will become all the more important as the global economy evolves and the previous delineations between high- and low-income countries shift along with it.

The United States Mission to UNESCO has been a strong supporter of EFA at UNESCO on both a policy level and a programmatic level. We have advocated for a multi-stakeholder approach and encouraged UNESCO

to partner with non-governmental organizations and the private sector to address education challenges. We have also supported literacy and human rights education programs, including Holocaust education and Teaching Respect For All.

FLETCHER FORUM: *The United States is working with Brazil and UNESCO to combat racism in schools worldwide through the “Teaching Respect for All” program. What sparked the creation of this partnership, and why Brazil? Why is it worthwhile to invest in anti-racism programming when more concrete educational needs also exist, such as poor infrastructure and a lack of textbooks?*

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KILLION: The Teaching Respect for All program is so important not only because of its goal of promoting tolerance through education, but also because it shows that the United States is ready to play a leading role internationally in combating racism. After the World Conference Against Racism in 2001 was hijacked and transformed into an “anti-American, anti-Israel circus,”¹ the United States remained disengaged from the UN’s work against racism. Teaching Respect for All, spearheaded by Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs Esther Brimmer, effectively ended this period of disengagement and signaled the United States’ commitment to working with the UN and other key countries to address the scourge of racial and ethnic intolerance. UNESCO and Brazil were natural partners: Brazil because of its shared struggle to overcome the legacy of slavery and UNESCO because of its leadership in international education and past work on tolerance education.

Concretely, Teaching Respect for All is mapping existing anti-racism programs worldwide, collecting best practices, and developing a curriculum framework for anti-racism and tolerance that countries can adapt to their respective contexts and needs. UNESCO is in the process of selecting the first pilot countries for the program and its goal is to start testing the curriculum framework this year. While I can understand the temptation to view tolerance education as less urgent than infrastructure, they are equally critical. Ethnic tensions continue to destabilize societies and lead to conflict, from the Sahel to Burma. And racism and discrimination continue to

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take a toll on education objectives and economic prosperity, even in the developed world. Education is essential to addressing these issues; it allows us to reach children in their formative years and to inoculate them against intolerance and extremism.

In addition to its anti-racism programming, UNESCO is working to combat anti-Semitism and ensure

that the tragic lessons of the Holocaust are understood, not just in Europe or the United States, but all over the world. UNESCO’s Holocaust Remembrance Education program is relatively new, but, thanks in part to U.S. support, it has already made important strides. Last year UNESCO held a high-level conference in South Africa to discuss how studying the Holocaust can prevent genocide in Africa. Thanks to this conference, countries like Rwanda and the Republic of Congo are working with UNESCO

to integrate Holocaust education into their national curricula. UNESCO will be holding a similar conference in Latin America in May. UNESCO is also partnering with the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research on a mapping project that will make it possible to compare representations of the Holocaust in school textbooks and national curricula. This will help UNESCO and its partners understand where they need to focus their efforts. I've made it a priority to support UNESCO's Holocaust Education program because I believe it is essential to stemming the rise of anti-Semitism and helping people understand the roots of genocide.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In 2011, the United States ceased all extra budgetary contributions to UNESCO in accordance with American legislation dating back to the 1990s after Palestine became the organization's 195th full member. How has the United States continued to engage UNESCO in the wake of this decision?*

KILLION: Despite the cessation of funding, the United States has remained very engaged in support of U.S. goals at UNESCO through the force of good ideas and creative partnerships. For example, we proposed a resolution to establish an International Day of Jazz, which quickly drew thirty-one co-sponsors and was adopted enthusiastically by UNESCO's 195-member General Conference. Jazz Day events draw musicians from around the world together through the freedom of music with the support of private sector sponsors. We have also encouraged UNESCO to establish more public-private partnerships and have helped them to reach out to U.S. companies and foundations interested in supporting UNESCO's work. For instance, we helped broker the partnership between UNESCO and Procter & Gamble and are encouraging expanded partnerships with Microsoft, Intel, and Google. We also work with American UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors—jazz legend Herbie Hancock, Oscar-winning actor Forest Whitaker, and Holocaust survivor Sam Pizar—to promote UNESCO values in support of freedom, human rights, and peace-building.

We succeeded in this work, and UNESCO and its member delegations appreciate our positive engagement. UNESCO is an organization that values collaboration and cooperation in support of common goals. However, I will not deny that it has become more difficult for the U.S. Mission as the funding crisis has continued and forced UNESCO to both slash spending and cut positions, which are never popular measures. We understand this frustration at the U.S. Mission and are working very hard to support the Obama administration's efforts to resolve this issue as soon as possible.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What are the impacts of U.S. disengagement with UNESCO, from both a programmatic and a political perspective?*

KILLION: U.S. disengagement poses a number of risks. It undermines the President's commitment to a strong multilateral approach in foreign policy. It also paves the way for other powers to play a more powerful role at UNESCO. In the wake of the U.S. funding cut-off, a number of countries including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Turkey and Indonesia, made large donations to help cover the shortfall, boosting their stature in the organization. China made a major contribution as well. We work with these countries on many issues; however, we do have significant differences of opinion on some very important policy areas. If the United States disengages from UNESCO, it is possible that other countries might in the future seek to dial back UNESCO's unique work in freedom of expression or Internet freedom, for example.

From a programmatic standpoint, U.S. disengagement would mean that we lose the opportunity to help instill democratic values in UNESCO's educational, cultural, communications, and cultural programs.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Finally, from a legislative standpoint, what would it take for the United States to resume budgetary contributions to UNESCO?*

KILLION: In order for the United States to resume funding, Congress would have to amend the current law barring U.S. funding to UNESCO. The President included funding for UNESCO in his FY 2014 budget, which was delivered to the Congress on April 10. The President's FY 2014 budget also contained a request for an amendment to the current legislative prohibitions against UNESCO funding.

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..... The United States will lose its vote in UNESCO's General Conference meeting in November of this year if U.S. funding is not restored.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See my mentor Tom Lantos' account of the disastrous conference at: http://www.humanrightsvoces.org/assets/attachments/articles/568_durban_debacle.pdf.