INTERNET AND THE RADICALIZATION OF YOUTH: PREVENTING, ACTING AND LIVING TOGETHER

QUÉBEC-UNESCO CONFERENCE
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UNESCO
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

IFAP
Information for All Programme

Québec

CONCEPT NOTE

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violent extremism is not associated with any particular religion, nationality, culture or ethnic group. That being the case, youth radicalization as a source of violence is becoming a major challenge for many societies today and is threatening the security and fundamental rights of citizens the world over. This phenomenon must be considered in light of the increasingly interconnected lives of young people, both on and off line, which heightens the need to address youth radicalization and extremism leading to violence from the perspective of the Internet. This complex challenge requires innovative, lasting and global solutions, underpinned by a strong commitment to ensuring cooperation and coordination among all stakeholders at the national and international levels.

Building on existing initiatives, UNESCO and the Government of Québec will organize a high-level international conference in Québec City from 30 October to 1 November 2016, entitled "Internet and the Radicalization of Youth: Preventing, Acting and Living Together." Following the first-ever conference on this topic, held in June 2015 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, this event will bring together researchers, specialists and civil society representatives as well as government officials to identify and propose useful projects and programs for preventing youth radicalization leading to violence and blocking paths that can lead to violent extremism. Special attention will be paid to the role that the Internet and media play at each step of these processes.

2. CONTEXT

As a result of its mandate, UNESCO has extensive experience in helping young people to be key players now and in the future through capacity building, citizen engagement opportunities, education, training and skills acquisition, critical thinking and sports, in order to promote social inclusion, sustainable development and lasting peace.

Canada

With the participation of the Government of Canada.

The *Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism* international conference, held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 16 and 17 June 2015, brought together government representatives, policymakers, specialists, professionals, militants, researchers and young people from around the world. They shared national experiences pertaining to interventions, effective strategic projects and procedures regarding the Internet's role in preventing radicalization and extremism that lead to violence. Organized by UNESCO as part of the Intergovernmental Information for All Programme (IFAP) in partnership with the international Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and with the support of the Arab Republic of Egypt, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Bulgaria, the Paris Conference was an opportunity to launch UNESCO's cross-sector initiative called *A New Integrated Framework of Action - Empowering Youth to Build Peace: Youth 2.0 – Building Skills, Bolstering Peace*.

The resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 recognizes the essential role that young people, the Internet and information networks play in sustainable development. *Resolution 2250 (2015)* pertaining to youth, peace and security, adopted by the United Nations Security Council, focuses on the role of young people in building peace and the fight against violent extremism. Moreover, the *United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, released in early 2016, stresses how important it is to link legal responses and security measures to persuasion strategies, which must be an essential component of action taken in this regard. UNESCO contributed extensively to the development of this plan, which also highlights the relative lack of attention that until now has been given to persuasion, which is a complementary aspect of radicalization. By virtue of its unique mandate, UNESCO could initiate activities with respect to human rights and global citizenship education and safeguarding humanity's cultural heritage and diversity, but can also promote skills conducive to intercultural dialogue and foster targeted actions to combat all forms of racism, discrimination and hate speech. UNESCO's Member States have stressed the essential role of aspects such as education in the prevention of violent extremism among young people and have adopted general guidelines to that end.

Fighting radicalization as a source of violence and violent extremism is a key strategic priority shared by the Governments of Canada and Québec.

Accordingly, the Government of Québec is striving to meet this challenge through its 2015-2018 Action Plan entitled *La radicalisation au Québec: agir, prévenir, détecter et vivre ensemble* (Radicalization in Québec: Acting, Preventing, Detecting and Living Together). Based on the values of solidarity, social cohesion and mutual understanding, this action plan aims for a better understanding of radicalization leading to violence by increasing the skills of stakeholders from various sectors in order to detect the first signs of radicalization and promote early action. Designed by an interdepartmental committee and placed under the coordination of Québec's Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion, the plan includes a set of 59 measures and strategic instruments grouped under four themes: acting, preventing, detecting and living together. Québec's Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie is a partner of the action plan and, through its contribution to organizing the Québec Conference, intends to encourage the dissemination of best practices internationally and promote the creation of networks among stakeholders.

3.   ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

3.1   Introduction

Media together with information and communication technologies provide young people with boundless opportunities for accessing information, creating and sharing knowledge, as well as for promoting exchanges and intercultural dialogue, especially to further common values, human rights, tolerance, dialogue and peace. However, the Internet is also being used in an increasingly active manner by radical groups as a means to promote violence and extremism.

By facilitating the anonymous dissemination of content in real time and enabling individuals who might otherwise be unable to have direct contact with one another to forge ties, the Internet can be a major factor in the processes that lead to violent extremism. To detect the online propaganda and recruitment strategies of violent extremist groups and combat this phenomenon, young people must hone their skills, be capable of exercising critical thinking and have values, attitudes and knowledge that will allow them to benefit fully from the Internet's potential as a platform and advocate for dialogue and peace, founded on human rights.

We must give young people the means to exchange views, communicate and cooperate by moving beyond social, cultural and linguistic borders, and to develop new forms of global citizenship – including digital citizenship. All of this demonstrates how important it is to increase young people's media and information literacy by focusing on environments that are socially, technologically and strategically favourable. Mastering the use of technological tools should include a dimension that is not only practical, but also ethical.

By violating human rights and fundamental freedoms, prejudice and exclusion can become fertile ground for the emergence of radicalization. The civic engagement of young people and their participation in promoting human rights, cultural and linguistic diversity and intercultural understanding are essential to building peace and sustainable development. In order to foster empathy, confidence and understanding among peoples and generations, we need to find ways to encourage individuals and communities to discover what they have in common, take an interest in and have respect for their own culture and the cultures of others, and accept their humanity instead of focusing their attention on their differences. Actively promoting the concept of a common and shared cultural heritage as a factor for unity and dialogue on a global scale is also important, in addition to making it meaningful and relevant in terms of daily lives of young people. This requires taking a fresh, clearheaded look at the way to best take advantage of the virtual community that the Internet represents as a space for action to promote global citizenship.

Dialogue, education, respect for cultural diversity and social cohesion are determining factors in defusing potentially dangerous situations and preventing the escalation of violence. What measures can concretely help establish an environment conducive to preventing radicalization as a source of violence, as well as to promoting and protecting such fundamental rights as freedom of expression and access to information? The policies related to these issues must be monitored and supported to ensure that they continue to be relevant to their objectives in the evolving and interconnected context of the real world and the virtual world.

3.2   Objectives

This international conference will be an opportunity to:

- better understand the point of view of young people and other stakeholders regarding the issues of radicalization and extremism leading to violence, as well as the Internet's role in these processes;

- identify the best practices of various players for preventing the online radicalization of youth;

- consider the possibilities for UNESCO to establish guidelines for drafting policies and establishing capacity-building measures to combat the online radicalization of youth and violent extremism;

- devise an international cooperation project focusing on carrying out action-oriented research, project implementation and support for creating a network of partner institutions under the auspices of UNESCO.

3.3   Details and outcomes

This international conference of high-level experts will bring together nearly 400 participants from governments, international organizations, the private sector, the academic community and civil society, as well as the media. Young people will take part in the conference as participants and members of working groups.

Parallel activities could be organized to round out the Conference's official program.

To enhance the contribution this conference will make to the implementation of the Agenda for Sustainable Development, the participation of disadvantaged young people will be ensured and their point of view will be sought.

The conference will take place in French and English, and simultaneous interpretation will be provided.