Meetings of National Commissions for UNESCO  
Proposal by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO  
(21 March 2014)

BACKGROUND

UNESCO has entered into a period of unprecedented challenges due to resource constraints and the need to demonstrate value to its Member States and people throughout the world.

The recent report of the Open-ended Tripartite Working Group on National Commissions provides *inter alia* valuable insights into the roles National Commissions can play in addressing the above challenges\(^1\). The report, including its Action Plan, (see Appendix) was endorsed by the 37th Session of the General Conference. Recommendation 8 calls for

- biennial regional meetings of National Commissions

and

- informal meetings [of National Commissions] held on the margins of the Governing Bodies meetings.

PROPOSAL FOR DISCUSSION

Consistent with the strategic thrusts of the Tripartite Working Group report and, in particular Recommendation 8, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO submits the following proposal. That:

a. Regular meetings of all National Commissions (subsequently called ‘Meetings’) be held on the margins of General Conferences at UNESCO Paris for purposes of meeting the following objectives: information exchange, capacity-building and addressing UNESCO priority issues and challenges. The Meeting agendas will be developed collaboratively by National Commissions, Permanent Delegations and the UNESCO Secretariat. Maximum use will be made of on-line technology to prepare for the Meetings and to minimize cost.

b. Regional meetings of National Commissions be a separate but integral part of the Meetings;

c. Provided there is consensus and strong support of sponsor(s), including financial support, additional Meetings could be held in the intervening years between General Conferences. Such additional Meetings would also include a regional component and could be held at UNESCO Paris or elsewhere.

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The proposal does, of course, not preclude the possibility of regional groups convening their own regional meetings if they wish to finance them.

RATIONALE FOR PROPOSAL

Duration of Meetings

Meetings are expected to last from 3 to 4 working days in order to address the objectives (stated in 'Section a' above), include separate meetings of National Commissions from UNESCO’s regions, and be cost-effective.

The most recent meeting of National Commissions, held on November 4, 2013 on the margins of the 37th General Conference, was attended by approximately 110 National Commissions from UNESCO’s five major regions. It demonstrated that a one-day meeting:

- can effectively convey useful information on five major topics, followed by brief comments, questions and responses;
- does not allow for in-depth exploration and discussion of major topics;
- does not permit collaborative development of approaches or solutions to major priority issues and problems confronting UNESCO National Commissions;
- does not permit separate regional meetings of National Commissions. (N.B.: No attempt was made to do so in the November 4 meeting.)

Consequently, three- to four-days are desirable Meetings, with one day set aside for separate regional meetings of National Commissions. In addition to focusing on issues specific to the regions, the separate meetings can also be used to discuss (from a regional perspective) topics under consideration by all National Commissions. The other two to three days of a Meeting would be used for information exchange (including exchange on good practices), capacity building and collaboratively addressing priority issues and problems, using working groups as well as plenary discussions.

Priority Issues and Challenges to be Discussed

The selection of priority issues and challenges requires consultation and collaboration between National Commissions, Permanent Delegations and the UNESCO Secretariat. However, based on the report of the Open-ended Tripartite Working Group and experience from the November 4, 2013 meeting of National Commissions, the following examples can be given:
• Developing effective approaches to establishing and/or expanding the network of partners in their countries and seek sponsorships in accordance with clearly established principles and procedures which are consistent with national legislation and UNESCO’s comprehensive partnership strategy (pursuant to Recommendation 5)

• Creating ways of engaging more closely with the larger UNESCO family, partners and networks, with a view to exchange advice, guidance and, as appropriate, coordination and support (pursuant to Recommendation 6)

• Working more actively with civil society and NGOs (pursuant to Recommendation 6)

• The UNESCO Secretariat facilitating the networking of National Commissions by gathering, highlighting and sharing information, knowledge and good practices with National Commissions on a more regular basis (pursuant to Recommendation 11)

• Building on the recent report by the National Commission for the United Kingdom2, which evaluated the financial impact of its Government’s investments into UNESCO. An assessment of the societal benefits of investments into UNESCO is of high importance to National Commissions. This resulted in the November 4 meeting of National Commissions recommending a seminar of on the subject. The outcomes of the seminar would be a valuable contribution to UNESCO and its National Commissions.

These examples are given for illustrative purposes. They are intended to be neither complete nor comprehensive.

**Cost Effectiveness of Meetings**

The Meetings, which would be held on the margins of General Conferences and would include separate regional meetings of National Commissions, are deemed to be cost-effective by the UNESCO Secretariat. They would utilize existing UNESCO resources, while minimizing logistical problems associated with facilitating regional meetings remote from UNESCO Paris.

The UNESCO Secretariat will be able to provide an estimate of conducting Meetings on the margins of General Conferences. Initial indications are that such Meetings would result in overall cost-savings.

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CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The proposal for Meetings of National Commissions on the margins of General Conferences (and possibly between General Conferences) is consistent with the ‘Report of the Open-ended Tripartite Working Group on the Follow-up to the Review of the Cooperation of the UNESCO Secretariat with National Commissions for UNESCO’. The Meetings are expected to increase the effectiveness of National Commissions, strengthen their network, contribute to addressing UNESCO’s priorities and challenges, and result in cost reductions. As for the Tripartite Working Group, Member States will have the possibility to be represented by delegations including representatives from both their National Commissions and Permanent Delegations.

The next step is for the proposal to be evaluated and discussed collaboratively by National Commissions, Permanent Delegations and the UNESCO Secretariat.