A historic turning point for democracy

At each of the key historic moments that have punctuated contemporary life over the past sixty-five years, UNESCO has always been ready to support the evolution of societies and the aspirations of peoples. Its Constitution upholds the democratic ideals of justice, freedom, equality and solidarity, and considers these principles to be the prerequisites of peace. Indeed, the Preamble to the Constitution directly links the ‘denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men’ to the ‘great and terrible war’. With respect to the changes the Arab world is currently undergoing, UNESCO is committed to increase its efforts to respond to the democratic aspirations of the region and the new political, social, cultural and educational challenges imposed by present and future social transformations. Its contribution will include setting up networks and initiating relevant and action-oriented debates, studies and analyses.

There is no denying the vital role played in these revolutions by the level of education of the populations concerned, their access to new information technologies and, not least, particularly in Tunisia from where this movement spread, the status of women. These themes, the real driving forces behind popular pro-democracy uprisings, have been at the heart of UNESCO’s priorities for several decades. Their impact on the democratic aspirations of peoples, and in particular those of young people, whose involvement in UNESCO programmes has always been fundamental, is a striking demonstration of the relevance of the struggle for these ideals that the Organization has led for decades.

At a time when the popular will for freedom, democracy and dignity are shaking entrenched regimes and claims for rights and basic freedoms are making headlines worldwide, the international community owes it to itself to fully grasp the scope of recent events. They have marked a historic turning point for democracy, not only in substantial changes in the political machinery but also in developments at the origin of this upheaval. Particular mention should be made of the eminently new and vital role that young people have played as active protagonists of change. This multidimensional phenomenon has shown that our societies are in a permanent state of flux, so we need to constantly reflect on our collective future. It has also become markedly obvious to what extent democracy is a social and political system with a very special dynamic, whose ideal form is never fully achieved. As this calls into question the functioning of all societies, UNESCO is well placed to seize this historic opportunity to support these movements towards freedom and the rule of law. It must therefore be part of the democratic processes that hold the promise of sustainability.

A solid platform for international cooperation

Although recent events in the Arab world have given rise to immense hopes for renewal, the actual conditions under which the various protagonists attempt to set up democratic institutions and a democratic culture still require a determined effort to identify all the issues, needs to be fulfilled and obstacles to be overcome. In this context, as a platform for
international cooperation and in line with its mandate to promote a culture of peace in which democracy is one of the keystones, UNESCO is committed to supporting transitions to democracy in a spirit of intellectual and moral solidarity. The round table on the theme “Democracy and Renewal in the Arab World” will provide a forum for the diverse voices of Arab civil society to express themselves on the transition to democracy and all that is at stake. It will aim to understand and decipher the social and political upheavals within the region. To this end, every effort will be made to initiate an interactive and dynamic debate, simultaneously involving the voices of youth and expert analyses, as well as other countries’ experiences of transitions to democracy, with emphasis on the range and diversity of viewpoints. The complexity of transitions to democracy raises a series of issues that demand a fresh viewpoint and informed debate. The debate will therefore address important questions on freedom of expression and the existence of strong and independent media; appropriate training of the police and armed forces to improve the integration and application of democratic principles and human rights; the obligations of the various authorities associated with a free and independent judiciary; the importance of the detailed dismantling of political data files; the need to consider the reconciliation of opposing groups within a given population; the transparency of elections, public works, archives and databases, and finally the crucial role of civil society in systematically entrenching the concept of democracy at grass-roots level. These themes are the minimum ramifications of democracy that must be taken into account in building a viable and durable system. They are also within the fields of competence of UNESCO, which has worked on sharing expertise and intellectual cooperation on these themes and has capitalized on a number of good practices for the benefit of countries engaged in a transition to democracy. The aim is thus to explore and identify, in a forward-looking way, specific guidelines for UNESCO action on democracy and its interaction with education, culture, science, communication and information.

**History(ies) of transitions to democracy in the world: mutual enlightenment and enrichment**

Modern history has been marked by numerous experiences of transitions to democracy, most notably in Europe and Latin America. Despite the specificities of each of these transitions, which have their own histories, successes, failures and sometimes limits, they represent an instructive reading grid that can be interesting for the new dynamics in the Arab world. An inter-regional dialogue to this purpose can have further interest as it will focus not only on “what should be done”, but also and mostly on “what should be avoided”. This same dynamic of dialogue has also its meaning inside the Arab region, where the word experience can be conjugated in plural. It is thus for UNESCO, in view of its principles of universality and international cooperation, to pave the way in a spirit of open-mindedness and mutual enrichment.

**Topics of interest and key questions to guide the discussions:**

**Democratic principles**
- Democracy in the Arab world: what hopes, what achievements?
- Towards democracy: what barriers, what potential outcomes?
- Historical background: democratic resources in the Arab world.
- Democracy, a new idea in the Arab world?
- State, public forums and changing societies: constitutional challenges and policies to be adopted.
- The question of the religious phenomenon, or the religious phenomenon in question?
- Open justice, fight against corruption, rule of law: barometers of democracy.
- Raising awareness of democratic principles in changing Arab societies.
Drivers of democracy
- Arab youth writes and builds its future.
- Arab women need democracy and democracy needs Arab women.
- Role and influence of the diaspora.

The environment of democracy
- The Arab Spring at a time of globalization: effects and counter-effects.
- Economic prosperity and the development imperative: a condition of democracy.
- Is the digital age transforming democracy?
- Free, independent, pluralistic and professional media: a prerequisite of transition to democracy.
- Independent media: a regulatory role for good governance.
- Information and communication technologies, social networking, internet: tools for civic participation.

Towards sustainable democracy
- Must the past be swept aside to build a democratic future?
- Understanding changing Arab societies, or how to overcome stereotypes.
- How can the barriers to democracy be anticipated?
- Experiences of transitions to democracy in Eastern Europe and Latin America: what practices to retain, what pitfalls to avoid?
- How can acquired democratic gains be made to last?

UNESCO’s commitment to democracy
The inventory of UNESCO’s action on democracy includes many initiatives, activities and resources – irrespective of region – all designed to meet the specific needs inherent to the attainment of democracy. Thus, in the wake of the transformations precipitated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, UNESCO action has been marked by some key moments, notably through the 1994 Programme for Central and Eastern European Development (PROCEED), which combined a series of initiatives to support the new regional order and launch further debate on democracy in the world. In addition, much work has been done on the association between democracy and culture, including such large-scale projects as the International Forum on Culture and Democracy held in Prague in 1991, which facilitated the first encounter of transitions to democracy of the East with those of the South. Another example is the international seminar Reinventing Democracy: Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion, organized in 1997. Finally, the project on A New Policy for the Next Century (DEMOS), which began in Latin America in 1995 and continued in Africa, has set up ‘laboratories’ of political and social analysis by and for the countries involved in democratic movements. In 1995, a survey on Philosophy and Democracy in the World was carried out in sixty-six countries under the direction of Roger-Pol Droit, which showed the importance of teaching philosophy for the advent of democracy. As a follow-up to all this, in 2003 the Executive Board of UNESCO adopted an integrated strategy to implement an international programme on democracy (167 EX/9), addressing three main lines of action: (i) fostering comparative analytical research; (ii) organizing international dialogues on the future of democracy; and (iii) supporting democracy in post-conflict societies. In this context, the International Centre for Human Sciences at Byblos (Lebanon) has undertaken empirical research on democracy and culture, as well as a number of case studies on democracy in post-conflict societies. In addition, the Organization’s range of partners working in the field of democracy, including UNESCO Chairs, regularly contributes to scientific and academic studies. In parallel, many educational tools – reference books and case studies, information kits – have been produced on human rights education, freedom of expression, press freedom, and other topics relating to democracy.
The inevitable revival of debate and action
UNESCO has thus capitalized on its considerable experience on the theme of democracy. However, in its promotion and support of democracy the Organization must remain vigilant and in tune with newly emerging issues. Indeed, behind the intransience of the concept of democracy significant changes are taking place. Democratic processes follow no fixed model; their features depend on the societies concerned, their individual histories, their strengths and limitations. This degree of complexity means continuous adaptation of the approach to democracy. In this period of great upheaval in the Arab region, the Director-General of UNESCO has already taken the initiative to ensure the active participation of the Organization, in the short to medium term, through a series of activities within its different areas of expertise, in order to make a timely contribution to support the social transformations now under way in the countries concerned. Nevertheless longer-term programming is essential to ensure that all actions are sustainable.

At issue in UNESCO’s targeted priorities will be identifying inspirational ideas that could lay the groundwork for action in line with the new challenges posed by this major turning point in contemporary history.

Thus an important part of the debate will be devoted to the role of youth as a central player in social change, and how UNESCO could involve young people and engage them in a sustainable process of democratization in the countries experiencing these major changes.

It is also essential that serious attention is paid to the role of women – a particularly significant question in the Arab world. UNESCO is convinced that women must be at the heart of discussions on the new order emerging in Arab societies today, taking into account the key role they have played in freedom and the struggle against inequalities, as well as their primary role in shaping a new kind of citizenship based on equal rights, the only guarantee of a viable and sustainable democracy.

In the field of education, the issue of democracy is being played out over a range of themes and centres of interest worth reviving in the light of the new regional order in the Arab world. Thus themes linked to education for peace, human rights, citizenship, democracy, the struggle against discrimination, and minority rights are all possible spheres of UNESCO action on which the experts and practitioners (educators, teachers) will be able to further elucidate today’s challenges and opportunities. The beneficiaries of this formal and informal education will not only be children and youth, but also those who have played or who have the potential to play a key role in the success of the transition to democracy, such as young opinion leaders and police officers.

A significant contribution will also be made by the social and human sciences through their intellectual tools and analytical methods in considering the complexity of the evolving human condition. The field of study will thus take in not only the concept of democracy but also its corollaries, human rights and basic freedoms; the in-depth analysis of social transformations; the role of youth; the question of gender; the comparative analysis of democracy; the promotion of critical thinking and philosophical debate; and the promotion of a culture of peace that constitutes the substrate most relevant to this richly complex domain. To this end, special attention will be paid to the social and cultural dimension of democratization in the Arab world, insofar as the deep understanding of the context and specific history of this part of the world will help to entrench democratic practices, rather than formal and institutional procedures of a general nature. Such an effort of understanding sets the scene for questions of identity, of references, and of cultural and religious diversity to be explored more deeply.
On the other hand, the origins and resources of social movements that have emerged in the Arab region will have to be examined, particularly in relation to the legitimacy of power and the very nature of the authority against which the people rose up and formulated their watchwords. In this respect it is the concept of political culture that must be reformulated and reconsidered.

Democracy and culture will be a major focus of discussion, notably in an attempt to draw up a working framework on the political and normative implications of multiculturalism for the foundation and functioning of democratic regimes. The debate will be guided by the principles enshrined in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which reminds us that ‘cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life’ (Article 2). At this time of profound political and social change, culture has a major role to play in debates on raising awareness of human rights and democracy through intercultural dialogue, both nationally and regionally. Culture governs public life and forms the basis of trust between citizens and public institutions. In this perspective, culture is a factor closely linked to good governance and democracy. However, if cultural diversity is a potential source of cultural enrichment and social cohesion, it can also become a source of tension and conflict. Only the establishment of sustainable democratic forums can guarantee cultural diversity in a unified framework by allowing the necessary freedom for diverse value systems, traditions and lifestyles to coexist in a harmonious and convivial atmosphere. The right to participate in cultural life is one of the achievements of democratic and pluralistic societies. Apart from the opportunity to access national heritage and various cultural products, designs, skills, beliefs and world views, it is about the right to participate through the collaborative shaping of cultural life. Even if cultural rights pay special attention to minorities, indigenous peoples and other vulnerable sectors of society, their scope should not be limited to protecting the rights of a specific group. In pluralistic societies, where citizens have several affiliations, cultural rights also imply their freedom to reinvent themselves and overthrow conventional models.

The revolutions that are causing turmoil in Arab societies today have been marked by the seal of digital technology and cyber-mobilization. This is a completely new feature that holds out as many promises as it raises questions. Information and communication technologies converging with democracy thus open up a field of study in terms of resources, as well as in terms of the content of public and state information. Indeed, the issue of transparency and free access to public data clearly raises the question of a state responsibility towards its citizens. In addition, recent events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) are proof that freedom of expression is truly a universal value, as historically embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. To identify and support such social and geopolitical developments in the Arab region, marked by the enthusiasm and determination shown by youth in their demand for basic rights, it is essential to assess media requirements and to promote free, independent and pluralistic media. In this way the UNESCO communication and information programme will have fresh material to analyze and innovate, taking into account that these new phenomena of social interaction will be prominent for years to come. Such an effect is worth examining from all angles, as are all the fresh implications for press freedom, freedom of expression, ICT for development, codes of ethics and conduct, etc.
In the **natural sciences**, particular emphasis will be placed on the contribution of science, scientific innovation and access to knowledge for building and consolidating democracy, especially by improving the economic conditions of youth in particular, and the associated imperatives of eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development. Indeed, the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge and skills are at the heart of relations between science and the *polis* because science and technology are now part of governance in the most general sense. The governance of science means defining standards as well as strengthening the ethical capacities of scientists, science teaching, encouraging research partnerships and increasing support for young researchers; moreover it must be accompanied by public awareness-raising. This all reinforces the democratic stock of transition countries through appropriate training and greater emphasis on skills for development, which is the other side of democracy.

**A roadmap as reference**

The consolidation of all these ideas for steering UNESCO’s work on democracy in the Arab world will highlight the main courses of action and guidelines that will not only be useful in this region but in all countries in transition to democracy. These guidelines could take the shape of a **roadmap** for UNESCO action to meet the challenges of the founding, restoration or preservation of democracies. The round table will thus focus on identifying practical areas of intervention, courses of action and specific recommendations.