

United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2021: Displaced persons and the contributions of UNESCO

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E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e rau rangatira mā
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa
*(To all authorities, all voices, to the many chiefs gathered here
Greetings, greetings, greetings to everyone)*

As I reflect on the challenges of the past year, including the impact of the pandemic, I think of people who already live in the most strained of circumstances: refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people.

In fleeing persecution millions around the world are cut off from homes, families, culture and shared knowledge. The pandemic has made the lives of these people even more difficult, as well as drawn many more into dire living conditions.

UNESCO was established after World War II in the belief that lasting peace must be founded on dialogue and mutual understanding. UNESCO works to build equality between people by sharing knowledge and by enabling access to knowledge. It does this in a range of ways, and often, what appear to be reasonably ‘dry’ international agreements make truly life changing differences in people’s lives.

Recognition of education is a huge barrier for many displaced persons – imagine arriving in a new country thinking that a major asset is your education, and finding your qualifications are not recognised? The complications this adds to the already challenging tasks of settling in a new country are immense.

In 2019, UNESCO adopted the [‘Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications’ concerning Higher Education](https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention). Put simply, the Global Convention asks that people’s qualifications are recognised fairly, supporting displaced people to be able to rebuild their lives and contribute to their new country.

[\(<https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention>\)](https://en.unesco.org/themes/higher-education/recognition-qualifications/global-convention)

During the last year the importance of education, and access to it has been starkly highlighted by the pandemic. Without access, education stops, and when education stops the gaps between people grow. UNESCO is one of many organisations who have been proactive in creating networks and quality resources for educators and families to use during lockdown.

Education—learning and developing understanding—also comes in the form of sharing stories and experiences. Not only does this help to create empathy between people, it brings the reward of being heard; especially for those who have not been able to express themselves, their values, their beliefs or their religion freely in their home countries. This basic human right—freedom of expression—is important to value and uphold. This is of central importance to UNESCO and, of course, for our democracy.

In our busy and complex world it is all too easy for the needs of groups of people and individuals to be unnoticed and unheard, or as individuals we find it hard to know how to help. In recent years the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO has supported a number of community groups provide space for people with different perspectives to share their stories and opportunities for the wider community to hear them.

One project the National Commission supported in 2017 was Te Hā Tangata or the Breath of the People. A wonderful and powerful project that aimed to elevate the voices of homeless people and provide an opportunity for them to share their histories and stories with the wider community. Students from Massey University worked collaboratively with these people—referred to as taonga—to develop their stories before sharing them with members of the public, face to face.

What could possibly be a more powerful way to foster a sense of belonging? Dialogue? And peace? The feedback from both those who shared their stories and those who heard them was deeply uplifting.

Another more recent example of UNESCO's work in New Zealand is our support for a project that took place during the level 4 lockdown. The Mapura Studios, which works with a special needs community in Auckland, realised that their community was feeling vulnerable and isolated during lockdown, and that they would greatly benefit from being supported and heard. They developed the Mapura Mask project, and their community created masks as a way to see being 'masked' as something to

enjoy not fear. This community felt displaced by the lockdown and through this activity they were able to feel more connected to each other and, later by sharing their creations, more connected to the wider community again.

This brings to mind a comment I heard from a participant in the Youth Diversity Forum that we organised in late 2019, as a response to the devastating terrorist attacks on mosques in Christchurch. After a weekend that gathered together 100 young people from a range of backgrounds, a young participant told me that she had never—before that weekend—had an opportunity to speak with someone who identified as Muslim. She said she felt so lucky to have had the opportunity to learn through face-to-face conversations. These young leaders' vision for Aotearoa is that everyone will accept, respect and celebrate each other's differences; within thriving communities, where all people can find a sense of belonging and be able to contribute to shaping the future of Aotearoa.

On that note, and just before I finish, I want to make one further point. So many people who have come to Aotearoa New Zealand under challenging circumstances go on to make significant contributions to their new communities. In fact, one of my predecessors Fred Turnovsky came to New Zealand as a refugee in 1940 and went on to lead the National Commission in the 1970s. He represented New Zealand at the Executive Board and was at the forefront of efforts to recognise New Zealand's place in the Pacific by moving us out of the Europe regional grouping into Asia/Pacific. This has had a significant positive impact on our work today.

However people are displaced—within our society or across borders—we all have a responsibility to notice, listen and respond; to play our part in creating communities where everyone can find a place, feel safe, know they belong and where they have opportunities to contribute to their community, their country and the world.

Thank you.