

First Regional meeting of the UNESCO science-related Chairs and Centres for South-East Europe and the Mediterranean

26-28 October 2022 | UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Palazzo Zorzi, Venice, Italy)

Meeting report

Meeting objective

The UNESCO Regional Bureau of Science and Culture in Europe organised from 26 to 28 October 2022 the first Regional meeting of UNESCO science-related Chairs and Centres for South-East Europe and the Mediterranean. The meeting brought together 28 Chairs and Centres from 8 countries of the region to explore how best UNESCO Chairs could contribute to address today's most complex challenges through their in-depth expertise and knowledge in the sciences and confront the most pressing science-related and environmental issues for the region.

Meeting proceedings

Jonathan Baker, Head of Science unit of the UNESCO Regional Bureau, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants, emphasising the importance of creating a science-related regional network, counting on the expertise and knowledge of UNESCO Chairs and Centres.

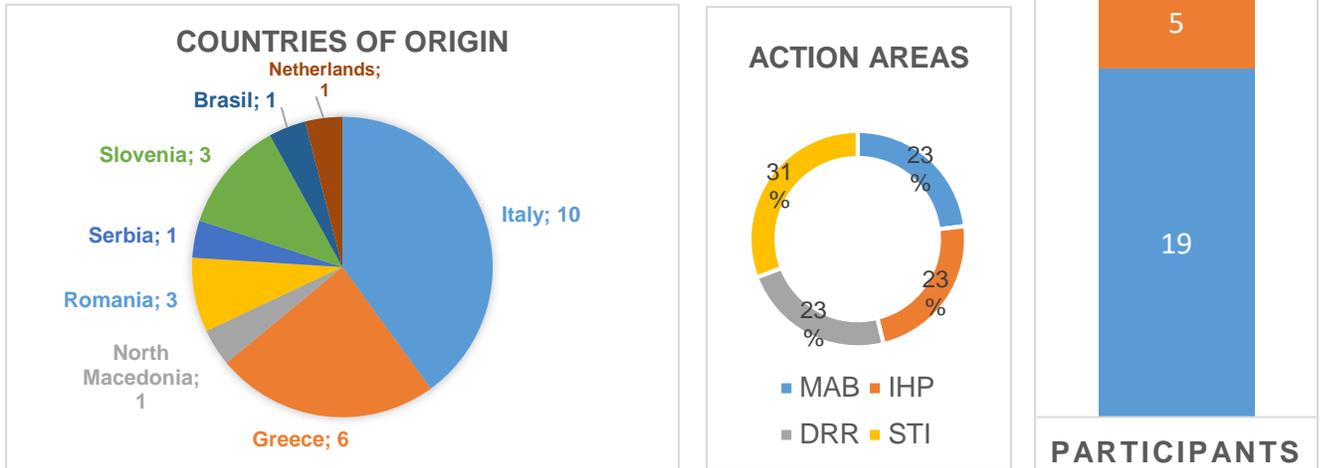
Massimiliano de Martin, Councillor for the Environment for the City of Venice, welcomed the participants to Venice, bringing the Mayor's greetings and best wishes for a productive and fruitful meeting.



©UNESCO Participants, Palazzo Zorzi courtyard

Participants

The meeting brought together UNESCO Chairs and Centres' representatives from across the South-East Europe and the Mediterranean region, with a total number of 28 Chairs and Centres from 8 different countries. Some participants represented both a UNESCO Chair, a Category II Centre and/or a Network.



Science-related Chairs and Centres work in different areas of science-related expertise (such as water, biodiversity, science policy, climate change) and most of them work across these action areas and at the interdisciplinary level.

Round tables

The meeting started with a presentation about the UNESCO Regional Bureau's activities and the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme, and the symposium's objectives and agenda.

Francesca Bampa, Project Officer, Science unit, offered an overview of the Chairs and Centres' previous experiences and expectations, based on a survey compiled by the participants prior to the meeting.

The first day of the meeting included 3 different roundtables, each moderated by a different Chair or Centre representative.

The **first thematic roundtable** focused on the [main Science action areas](#):

- **DRR** (disaster risk management, resilience and climate change);
- **STI** (basic science, open science and open data, artificial intelligence, open education and distance learning);
- **IHP** (resource management, water education, water security);

- **MAB** programme (ecosystems, plants and human health, biodiversity, ecotourism)

Participants were divided based on their expertise and briefly presented their Chair or Centre's work and role. Each group reflected on their impact at the regional and national level, and on the collaborations and networks of which they are part. Each group concluded the discussion by drafting 3 recommendations to share in the plenary session with the other participants.

Key messages from the first roundtable:

- Science-related UNESCO Chairs and Centres can have a direct impact at national level, strengthening policy makers' tools in facing environmental and climate-related challenges. For example, DRR related Chairs and Centres already have a central role in times of emergency, suggesting and guiding policy makers to adopt accurate first responses. However, collaboration in the long-term, addressing long-term policies, is still lacking. To do so, regional and national bodies should recognise UNESCO Chairs and Centres as key partners to team up with.
- There are still substantial differences between national education systems in the region. In this regard the UNESCO Chairs and Centres' network could facilitate collaborations beyond borders, and work in addressing common regional challenges.
- UNESCO Chairs and Centres should first maintain strong sectoral specialised expertise, only with this precondition can working at the interdisciplinary level would bring real value. Participants noted, however, that funding opportunities for intersectoral projects were limited.
- UNESCO Chairs and Centres represent excellence in the academic system, however it is necessary to encourage knowledge sharing with the general population, for example through open access to education and scientific information.

The **second thematic roundtables** aimed at stimulating the dialogue on [interdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches](#). Through the World Café ¹methodology the participants moved from one table to another, allowing them to discuss the three proposed crosscutting topics:

- **Culture and science for sustainable societies**
- **Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**
- **Digital innovation and its ethical dimensions**

Moderators and rapporteurs of each table summarised the considerations made by the groups in 3 recommendations.

¹ <https://theworldcafe.com/>

Key messages from second roundtable:

- Science and culture are key sectors in addressing sustainability in an all-encompassing manner, considering the 3 spheres of sustainability that is society, economy and environment. It is necessary to find ways to explain to stakeholders the need to work in an interdisciplinary manner within Science and Culture.
- Involving young people and their expertise - students or early career scientists - is essential for our future. In this regard, e-learning is becoming a central tool, enabling more people to participate in lectures, as well as training the educators and school teachers.
- Digital innovation can facilitate and improve the value of the work of researchers, by allowing them to deal with more data and push the analysis further. Artificial Intelligence (AI) should not replace the reflections and responsibilities of the scientists, and they should instead take AI inputs into their work as a support and not as a replacement.

The first day of the meeting closed with at the **third thematic roundtables** on [existing challenges](#) for UNESCO Chairs and Centres, at the **national, regional and international** level following the same World Café methodology.

Key messages of the third roundtable:

- UNESCO Chairs and Centres are working to bridge the gap between the United Nations and local institutions, and national governments should recognise properly their role and allow a better allocation of funds.
- At the international level, UNESCO should better connect UNESCO Chairs and Centres with UN agencies, for better visibility, mapping expertise in the region, and facilitating the establishments of joint projects.
- Despite their well-recognised prestigious role at international level, there's still a low perception in the national university system of the added value of being a UNESCO Chair. UNESCO National Commissions could play an instrumental role in enhancing this. While UNESCO Chairs are supported by their own university system, Centres are more independent, and therefore in some ways more vulnerable.
- In South-East Europe, to promote dialogue and cooperation, we need to address common challenges together, across borders, and the UNESCO Chairs and Centres network can play an important role in this regard.

On Day 2, results of the prior day's discussions and recommendations were summarised. Afterwards a final [fourth set of roundtables on pathways and opportunities](#) was held, to identify possible pathways and future opportunities for Science-related UNESCO Chairs and Centers in South-East Europe and the Mediterranean, based on the challenges identified the previous day.

Key messages of the fourth series of roundtables:

- Risk management (whether it be related to climate, disasters or other science related challenges) should be addressed in an integrated and long term perspective, focusing on resilience and adaptation instead of facing each crisis one at a time.
- Promote cross-sectoral integration and develop a shared platform where Chairs and Centres can co-create knowledge at the regional level, including mapping of initiatives, best practices and the promotion of joint projects, facilitating access to joint funding.
- UNESCO Chairs and Centres have to communicate their work and take the responsibility of disseminating the results to prove their value. UNESCO Chairs and Centres have to take a step forward and promote knowledge sharing and training teachers and students, notably through online webinars, tutorials, and summer schools.

At the end of the meeting key recommendations were summarised under 4 different categories as set out in the table below:

<p>ROLE OF UNESCO CHAIRS AND CENTERS</p>	<p>VISIBILITY</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SC related Chairs and Centres have a key role to provide scientific knowledge, build capacity and transfer this knowledge to society, leaving no one behind. • SC related Chairs and Centres should help connect different scales (and knowledge/disciplines) from local to global. • Network of Chairs and Centres should be key agents and promoters of open science and open access and play a role in enhancing the development of responsible digital innovation for distance-learning higher education (i.e. virtual labs), also aiming to reduce the digital gap. • UNESCO Centres and Chairs should promote participatory approaches and bring science closer to the people so that the wider public sees how Centres and Chairs and networks contribute to wider societal challenges. • UNESCO Chairs and Centres can help promote sustainability through university charters and foster cross-sectional, integrated, and interdisciplinary engagement and literacy. • UNESCO Chairs and Centres should continue to contribute to science education in all levels and forms of education and better map and promote the existing networks, impact indicators and tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underlined the importance of partners including UN system recognising the important role of UNESCO Chairs and Centres as key partners, notably for the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. • Needs to be a better online visibility (notably with youth) of Chairs and Centres at all levels, highlighting their diversity, stories of their work, tutorials, and summer schools. • Chairs and Centres to work with national commissions to promote more visibility of the network at the national level and better coordination notably through the constitution of national networks.
<p>FUNCTIONING OF NETWORKS</p>	<p>EXPERTISE AND MULTIDISCIPLINARITY</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To strengthen or constitute thematic groups of SC related Chairs and Centres (e.g. on DRR, on water, big data and AI) at the regional and international levels based on demands of member states. • UNESCO to assist networks of SC Chairs and Centres to build online platforms at regional and international scales including mapping of initiatives, best practices and the promotion of joint projects and accessing joint funding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNESCO Centres and Chairs should maintain strong sectoral specialised expertise, as only then will working in an interdisciplinary manner have real value. • That Chairs and Centres can promote a more multidisciplinary and holistic approach to challenges such as climate change, biodiversity and water management, notably at city and UNESCO site scales.

The Palazzo Zorzi Declaration

At the end of the two days of discussion, debate and exchange, during the plenary the participants adopted the **“Palazzo Zorzi Declaration of UNESCO science-related Chairs and Centres from South-East Europe and the Mediterranean”** (Annex I).

The Declaration includes and summarises the recommendations that emerged during the roundtables and aims to emphasise the key role of UNESCO science-related Chairs and Centres in supporting UNESCO’s priorities and programmes, including interdisciplinary ones, and underscores how best to manage these networks and increase their visibility.

The 30th anniversary of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme: Transforming



©UNESCO Adoption of the Palazzo Zorzi Declaration

knowledge for just and sustainable futures

The results of the First Regional Meeting of UNESCO Chairs and Centres in South-East Europe and the Mediterranean were brought forward to the 30th anniversary of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme: Transforming knowledge for just and sustainable futures, held in UNESCO Headquarters in Paris from 3 to 4 November 2022.

The UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe organised a side event entitled *“Addressing complex interdisciplinary challenges through knowledge sharing and cross-disciplinary cooperation of Chairs”*, building upon the results of the First Regional meeting of

Science-related UNESCO Chairs and networks in South-East Europe. The event welcomed 120 participants including Chairs and National Commissions from all over the world, but especially from the Europe and North America regions. Participants from the Venice meeting presented the Palazzo Zorzi declaration.

The event was very well received, and participants expressed the urgent need for further networking, inter-disciplinary cooperation, and knowledge sharing among UNESCO Chairs and networks at the regional level. The side event served to exchange knowledge and catalysed emerging research and innovation for the Chairs in Europe.



Figure 3. ©UNESCO “Addressing complex interdisciplinary challenges through knowledge sharing and cross-disciplinary cooperation of Chairs” event at the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme 30th anniversary. Paris, 3rd – 4th November 2022

As a follow up to both meetings, UNESCO Regional Bureau is developing in collaboration with HQ in Paris a platform and framework to continue and sustain the collaboration and dialogue across disciplines among Chairs, Centres and Networks in the sciences and beyond. Multiple initiatives led by the Chairs having participated in both events are ongoing and will be framed in the platform and framework that is being developed.