

Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry led by Young Adults: Rediscovering Community-Rooted Wisdom, Practices & Resources Towards Collective Healing, Racial Justice and Well-Being

A Pilot Programme

A. Introduction

Children, young people and young adults form the largest population groups on this planet. Globally, 53% of humanity is under 30, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, under 30s make up 70% of the population.¹ UN agencies recognise that this high number of young people and young adults presents a unique opportunity for our collective future. They encourage initiatives at all levels to empower the younger generations and nurture their leadership and well-being. The empowerment and nurturing will in turn enhance their potential to contribute to collective healing, and enable them to lead and facilitate the transformation of global societies. These initiatives are particularly important for the regeneration of local communities because they can inspire and support young people to effect meaningful localised actions, and to contribute to innovative ways of confronting the challenges facing humanity.

UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy (2022-2029) focuses on gender, Africa and youth, and the UNESCO [Collective Healing Initiative](#) perceives young adults as knowledge-holders, and partners of social transformation. The Initiative also regards peoples of all ages who have experienced historical traumas as change-agents who can embody wisdom and practices of resiliency, healing and well-being. It seeks to inspire and enthuse young adults (aged 18-30) to initiate intergenerational dialogue & inquiry in communities impacted by the legacies of dehumanisation and structural violence. The intergenerational processes are key to help reconnect with community-rooted vision and ideas and expand on indigenous and traditional cultural resources towards co-creating a flourishing life for all.

B. Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry

For people living in communities torn by historical mass atrocities (such as slavery, genocide, colonialism, economic vulnerability, etc.), and continued systemic racism and discrimination, silence is a common symptom of intergenerational trauma.² However, breaking the silence about past wounds and ongoing injustice can be complex. To end the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next requires both the giving of testimony about the experiences of wounding, and the presence of a witness to attend to the effects of trauma. This necessarily involves risks for both parties as consciously and unconsciously telling about and/or bearing witness to the stories of the dehumanising harms and their damaging consequences can be (re)traumatising. Without facilitated spaces for caring listening, deep dialogue and mutual inquiry, voices about past brutality, intergenerational trauma and present alienation might be re-silenced.

¹ UN (2022) "Young People's Potential, the Key to Africa's Sustainable Development"
<https://www.un.org/ohrls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>

² Richter, J. (2017). "Intergenerational layers of silence: How the concealed or the outspoken remain undiscussable or indescribable", in L. Auestad & A. Treacher Kabesh (Eds.), *Traces of violence and freedom of thought* (pp. 149–164). London: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature

Research and grassroots practices have highlighted and demonstrated the importance of intergenerational dialogue & inquiry in integrating past trauma as part of collective healing, racial justice and well-being.³ Likewise, traditional wisdom, such as that illustrated by the African Akan metaphor of 'Sankofa', and the indigenous idea of 'medicine wheel',⁴ also suggests that remembering the past is a path to recovering the knowledge of previous generations, connecting past-present-future, harmonising with all elements in the cosmos, and restoring the wholeness of our being.

In particular, when community elders remember and share experiences, and when young adults listen and attend to the stories, there can emerge a subtle shift – from people silently living out family pains, guilt, humiliation, and other sufferings, to telling and bearing witness to scars of dehumanisation, and inquiring into their causes and legacies. This can mean that neither deeply tragic personal and communal histories nor tales of survival and strengths will any longer be dissociated from the continuity of common human narratives. Finding out more about trauma response and trauma integration, and learning how to heal the *soul wound*⁵ of humanity will not only benefit the present generation, it can also guide our collective journeys into a better future for all generations involved.

Thus the UNESCO Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry programme seeks to co-create a new narrative for communities to live by in the service of healing. It intends to restore holistic well-being wellness (i.e. physical, psychological, relational, spiritual, etc.) in the individual, family, community, and society, as well as renew the temporal continuity of our collective being and becoming. Drawing on both endogenous practices and research insights, the programme recognises that young adults must lead this process.⁶ When young adults listen to elders, and elders listen to the young, stories are invited, created, (re)narrated, curated, and transformed.

Through caring listening, deep dialogue and mutual inquiry, young adults, elders, and other stakeholders in the community can recognise the roots of dehumanisation, and ever present structural violence and systematic exploitation. They can also become more consciously aware of the spiritual harm inflicted on the human soul. Such an awareness can be felt as a light that permeates the layers of scars and transcends grievance, guilt and humiliation. New consciousness of the equal worth of all persons emerges in this process through which we can recognise each other as embodied souls and spiritual beings of non-instrumental value.⁷ Such an awareness reconnects us with our human dignity and can help us move beyond the dualist views of peoples, e.g. us-vs-them, victim-vs-perpetrator, wounded-vs-healer, and so forth.

³ Hübl, Thomas. (2020). *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds*, Louisville, CO.: Sound True; DeGruy, Joy. (2017). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Portland: DeGruy Publication; Duran, E. (2006). *Healing the soul wound: Counseling with American Indians and other native peoples*, New York: Teachers College Press. Healing the Soul Wounds, UNESCO (2020). *Healing the Wounds of Slave Trade and Slavery. Approaches and Practices: A Desk Review*. Brighton: Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace Publishing.

⁴ Kopacz, D. and Rael, J. (2018) *Walking the Medicine Wheel: Healing Trauma & PTSD*, Pointer Oack/Tri S Foundation

⁵ Duran, E. (2019). *Healing the Soul Wound: Trauma-Informed Counseling for Indigenous Communities*, New York: Teachers College Press

⁶ Fromm, Gerard (2022). *Traveling through Time: How Trauma Plays Itself out in Families, Organizations and Society*, Manila: Phoenix Publishing House

⁷ Gill, S. & Thomson, G. (2022). *Understanding Spiritual Harm*, Position Paper, Global Humanity for Peace Institute

In sum, Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry gives voice to the silenced, and, by so doing, the community can revive place-based wisdom, spiritual practices and other cultural resources that may have sustained successive generations, revealing the ‘treasures’ long hidden but now rediscovered and recollected. When shared and distributed, such communal *gems* can enable all stakeholders to reconnect with resiliency and caring. The (re)naming and (re)claiming of communal *gems* may serve as an opportunity to reflect upon the structural conditions necessary to enrich well-being, encourage just societies, and enhance community regeneration.

C. Aims & Objectives

The intergenerational dialogue & inquiry aims to:

- 1.** Listen to people’s memories of histories and understand how they perceive their present lived realities in connection to past atrocities and continued striving;
- 2.** Recognise community-rooted resiliency, strength, and approaches to reconciliation, restoration and regeneration;
- 3.** Rediscover, collect and share cultural wisdom, spiritual practices and communal resources for healing, justice and well-being;
- 4.** Co-construct visions for a more humane and caring world, and identify structural conditions for caring systems and just societies.

D. Format and Processes

Creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue & inquiry, in communities suffering historical atrocities and continued structural brutality, requires caring facilitation to be in place in order for the voices and stories to come to the fore, without the risk of re-silencing and re-traumatising. The intergenerational processes also depend on the strength of the relational bonds amongst young adults and older people, the creation of courageous and caring spaces of meetings, and the sensitive holding of the spaces from the community organisations/partners.

There are seven key steps in the initial pilot programme process:

(1) Identifying and inviting participants

Finding the right participants is an art. Selecting 5-10 young adults who represent the diversity of the community may take some time. Young adults’ motivation and interest in listening, inquiring and learning are important. Likewise, identifying community elders requires care. Elders must be those who are willing to enter into dialogue with young adults, both to share and to listen, and who might find it meaningful to engage in such experiences.

Community partners may wish to identify an initial small group of young adults and/or elders and ask them to support identification of further participants. This ‘snowball’ sampling approach can help the group to grow organically before any formal process of relationship building has begun.

(2) Introduction to the process and capacity building of young adults

The community partners will lead participants into the process by highlighting the ethics of respect and inclusion and the arts of inquiring, listening and dialogue, leaving ample spaces for co-creating the processes.

Some groups may wish to work with only their young participants first, to develop relationships, trust, and leadership capacities, to support their ability to lead the intergenerational inquiry process. This may include engaging participants in online capacity building workshops, nurturing relevant qualities and skills to prepare young participants for the inquiry process.

(3) Relational enrichment and trustbuilding

It is important for the intergenerational process to start with relational enrichment and trustbuilding. Relational and trustbuilding practices are culturally diverse. These can take many forms, such as hospitality, space-design, a walk in nature, making a cup of tea, preparing a snack, rituals, and so forth. Relationship and trust form the basis for creating a congenial space for deep encounter, listening, sharing and dialogue.

Some groups may wish to facilitate open dialogue spaces for their participants to get to know each other, and build mutual trust and care, before formally engaging in the intergenerational conversations. This might be anything from a residential weekend, to an afternoon workshop. It could be online or in-person. This is an opportunity for partners to embody the values of the programme and model these to participants, as well as to answer questions and build the strength and resilience of the group. The better the group understand one another and trust one another, the more fruitful the ensuing processes will be.

(4) One-to-one/small group conversations

Once there is the relational basis for listening and sharing, intergenerational pairs or small groups can begin their formal dialogue & inquiry. This would typically be between one or two young adults and an older person.

Where appropriate, these conversations can be witnessed by other participants for mutual learning, and may be fruitfully audio, or audio-visually, recorded. Young adult participants might find the suggested questions in [Appendix 1](#) helpful as prompts. As part of these conversations, partners/participants may like to consider including practices such as:

- inviting the 'spirit' into the pair/circle/community space to accompany the process, and to create an atmosphere of openness and serenity
- sharing/telling/listening, including mutual listening to and mutual sharing of stories
- dialogue through mutual questioning and inquiring to explore the past, present and future
- placing personal experiences in wide social contexts
- analysing the root causes of sufferings
- identifying the practices of strengths and resiliency
- understanding the meaningfulness of the stories, including reflecting back what is heard, and checking to see if what has been said has been fairly interpreted by the listener(s).

(5) Focus Group conversations

This is an opportunity for all the elders and young participants to share their experiences and insights from their one-to-one or smaller group conversations. Facilitators may support them to draw out healing practices, cultural resources, and stories of hope, spiritual transformation and wisdom. They may also guide further dialogue and reflection on these learnings.

These sessions will always start and end with rituals of mutual gratitude. It is likely to be desirable to audio record these sessions for reference later.

(6) Co-creating new knowledge and deepening understanding

All the young adults will work together to identify common themes and recognise important differences. They will reflect on emergent ideas and core wisdom, practices and resources, arriving at new knowledge and deeper understandings about collective trauma and collective healing, including the spiritual dimensions of these.

From here, they can begin to develop future-making narratives of restoration, justice and communal well-being.

Partners/facilitators may support young adults to structure and record their findings. The format of this is at the discretion of the group; it might take the form of a report, but might also be presented through, e.g., videos, arts, music, writing, journaling, personal blogs, podcasts, or websites.

(7) Celebrating community's 'treasures' and proposing for collective healing

Having drawn together key learning and insights from the process, young participants will be supported by facilitators to bring together community stakeholders (online or in person) to disseminate the findings of the process. This 'call to community' will be an opportunity for young adults to present the intergenerational dialogue & inquiry processes and insights, and share and consolidate the future-facing narratives, wisdom, ideas and practices. It is an opportunity to consider together the structural and institutional conditions for ending dehumanisation and propose meaningful ideas for confronting the community's existing challenges – towards a community healing plan.

E. 'Treasures' to be Collected (with informed consent)

The project processes described above will be likely to capture 'treasures', 'gems' or stories/wisdom in the following forms:

- Recorded conversations and dialogues (both one-to-one and focus group conversations) in audio-visual formats;
- Life resources and documentation (e.g. photos, artefacts, stories, practices) shared by elders, and by the young adults;
- Young adults' creative reflection on the intergenerational processes in formats of their choice, such as videos made on the mobile phones, arts and drawings, music and songs composed, writings, journaling, personal blogs, podcasts, websites, and so forth;
- Cultural/indigenous/spiritual practices of resiliency, resistance and regeneration for sharing in formats that are agreed upon by the community;
- Other culturally appropriate items that express the community's wisdom, practices and resources for resiliency, strengths and transformation;
- Formally documented public sharing sessions with stakeholders and summaries of key learnings from these.

F. Towards Collective Healing, Social Justice and Well-Being

At the end of the intergenerational dialogue & inquiry pilots, the community partners and UNESCO's coordinating team will come together to review and examine insights and learnings emergent from the seven steps. The proposals for spiritual transformation, and community regeneration will be discussed to identify convergent and divergent ideas.

The community stakeholders might further reflect on whether there is motivation, enthusiasm and infrastructure to move from intergenerational dialogue & inquiry to initiating active processes of healing, justice and well-being.

UNESCO coordinating team is developing a Collective Healing Handbook for Facilitators based on both desk research of existing collective practices, and key findings from the pilots of intergenerational dialogue & inquiry.

Once completed and tailored, the Collective Healing Handbook will be introduced to global communities as resources. UNESCO coordinating team will provide capacity-building workshops to young adults and professional facilitators who are interested in offering collective healing workshops and experiential activities to their own and other worldwide communities.

G. UNESCO Future Leaders Academy

Young adults who take part in the intergenerational dialogue and inquiry will be invited to become candidates for the UNESCO's Future Leaders Academy. It includes providing input to the Academy's programme, co-designing and co-identifying the curricula for the Academy, and participation in the Academy in the pilot phase as UNESCO Fellows.

H. Community Benefits

Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry can provide communities with rich and enriching processes of reflection, questioning, and learning. In participating in the programme, communities can receive the following benefits:

- integrating personal stories into the communal and global histories;
- forming future-facing narratives;
- understanding meaningful routes to spiritual transformation;
- recognising necessary practical steps towards healing, justice and well-being.

The young adults can be nurtured to rise and become facilitators of positive change. They can invite community elders, and other stakeholders to collaborate and propose institutional processes necessary to end cycles of destruction and patterns of exploitation.

Community partners, such as organisations, businesses and institutions can begin to connect and develop a *collective healing alliance*. They may formulate joint-initiatives to introduce innovative public policies in domains such as education, housing, health, public finance, employment, and so forth. They can also facilitate participatory policy dialogue and advocate for policy change.

Appendix 1: Sample Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry Questions

Young adults may want to consider exploring some of the following questions to guide their intergenerational dialogue & inquiry with community elders. The questions below are envisaged as inspiration only, not as a script. Young adults are encouraged to engage fully in the dialogue, sharing their own experiences and perspectives as they feel comfortable, and to allow the conversation to have a natural flow.

1) **Context and background:**

- Please would you share a little about you?
- What motivated you to be here today?

2) **Looking back: History and challenges:**

- What was it like to grow up in your household, neighbourhood, community and society?
- How would you describe your life as a young adult?
- What do you recall as being of most importance to you growing up?
- Growing up, to what extent would you say you were aware of histories of violence or injustice and how these impacted you or your community?
- Would you be willing to share what you recall as the greatest challenges you personally encountered as a young adult?
- What about your community? What would you say were the important challenges facing your community at that time? For example:
 - What were your experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, oppression, or deprivation as a young adult, either as a victim or perpetrator of these?
 - How did you understand or make sense of these experiences?
 - What were your community's experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, oppression, deprivation? How did you understand or make sense of your community's experiences?

3) **Looking back: Sources of advice and support:**

- As a young adult, were there times when you needed advice and support? Who did you turn to at these times? Why these people? – what was it about them?
 - Did you go to the elders of your community for support?
 - What advice do you recall being offered?
- From whom or how else did you seek/find advice and support?
- Can you recall ways in which your family or community supported you when you came across difficulties?
- How did your family or community support each other in these circumstances?

4) **Looking back: Sustaining and spiritual practices and qualities**

- Looking back, what qualities would you say were significant in sustaining you/your family/community in the past? Can you recall specific examples of how you were nourished by these qualities? Were there particular people or things that brought these qualities into your life?
- Were there specific habits or practices (e.g. spiritual practices or rituals) that were significant in supporting you? Could you try to explain how these practices helped sustain you?

5) *Your lived experiences today:*

- Thinking about your life now, what qualities and practices are sustaining you?
 - How do they differ from those you recall in your past?
 - Could you explain how these practices are nourishing to you?
 - Are there particular people or things that bring these qualities into your life?
- Are there qualities or practices that you would say have been meaningful or significant in helping you and your community overcome the effects of, for instance, racism/discrimination, injustice, poverty and marginalisation, in your day-to-day lives?
- Are there qualities and/or practices that you see as meaningful in helping you and your community overcome/face the effects of other crises, such as climate change, in your day-to-day lives?

6) *Understanding and wisdom:*

- Within your culture, what would you say is the most important wisdom on how to best live? Where does this wisdom originate from?
- Are there stories within your culture/religion that you would like to share with young people, that may support them to flourish in the future?
- Comparing yourself and your peers with young people today, what do you feel young people today understand less well or better compared to the past?
- Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, what might you tell your past self or peers?