

## *Concept Note*

### *UNESCO Global Observatory for Youth Empathy and Engaged Citizenship*

#### *Empathy Education as Central to Youth*

It is evidenced that empathy (the ability to understand and do good for others by perceiving or experiencing their life situations) is crucial to enabling positive attitudes and prosocial behaviors in youth. Founded on a concrete base of active and applied research undertaken over the past decade by the UNESCO Chairs at the University of Galway and Pennsylvania State University, we believe that not alone can empathy be learned during adolescence, but it has most value for young people who are marginalised. Based on research published widely in international journals our team have turned ‘evidence to action’ by developing knowledge and matching it to resources and toolkits, notably an empathy education program, *Activating Social Empathy (ASE)* for schools and community settings among adolescents aged 14-18. The ASE program is now in the final stages of adoption by the Irish government’s Department of Education as compulsory education curriculum for secondary schools. We seek to expand these successes globally.

#### *Youth as Researchers (YaR) – Empathy in Action*

Closely related to this, through youth-generated knowledge, the YaR Program builds the capacity of youth to carry out action research on issues of concern to their lives and their wider community. A key initiative of the UNESCO Global Chairs Network, the program has been hugely successful in bringing youth voice to the fore as part of a global initiative documenting youth-led solutions for example, to the Covid-19 crisis worldwide. Underpinned by social empathy, YaR supports research for civic and social good that is undertaken by, designed and implemented by youth. Actively supporting and empowering young people to take action on issues that are relevant to their lives gives them a voice in tackling societal challenges, creating opportunities for us all by generating knowledge to influence policy and practice. For the last 10 years Patron to the Chair and UNESCO Centre, actor Cillian Murphy has played a central role in the creation and development of the YaR program. This focus on empathy through youth

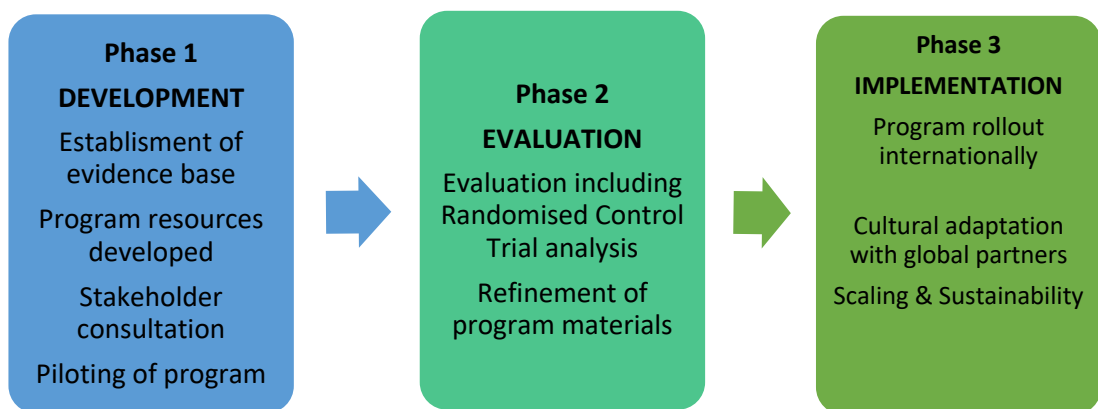
enabled research is core to UNESCO’s education agenda for humanistic and citizenship education. Likewise, the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) includes a key objective to ‘Encourage and equip young people with the necessary resources to become active citizens, agents of solidarity and positive change.’

### ***Building our Vision***

Based on this initial success, we are building our international cadre of partners and our unique solutions base of evidence implantation in schools and in particular areas of need for communities. Our vision is to create a ***UNESCO Global Observatory for Youth Empathy and Engaged Citizenship*** located at Penn State University and the University of Galway in Ireland. Working with partner organizations across the world, the Observatory will act as a leading think-tank on empathy education globally. It will serve as a virtual community connecting up to date and applied research, based on evidence, to design interventions with young people to advance societal good. Encompassed within the framework of youth civic engagement (including political, social, ethical and economic engagement), the Observatory will support young people to take active roles in society. It will have an interest in serving marginalised and socially excluded youth populations in fragile states and/or countries in post conflict as well as for generic youth populations.

### ***Purpose***

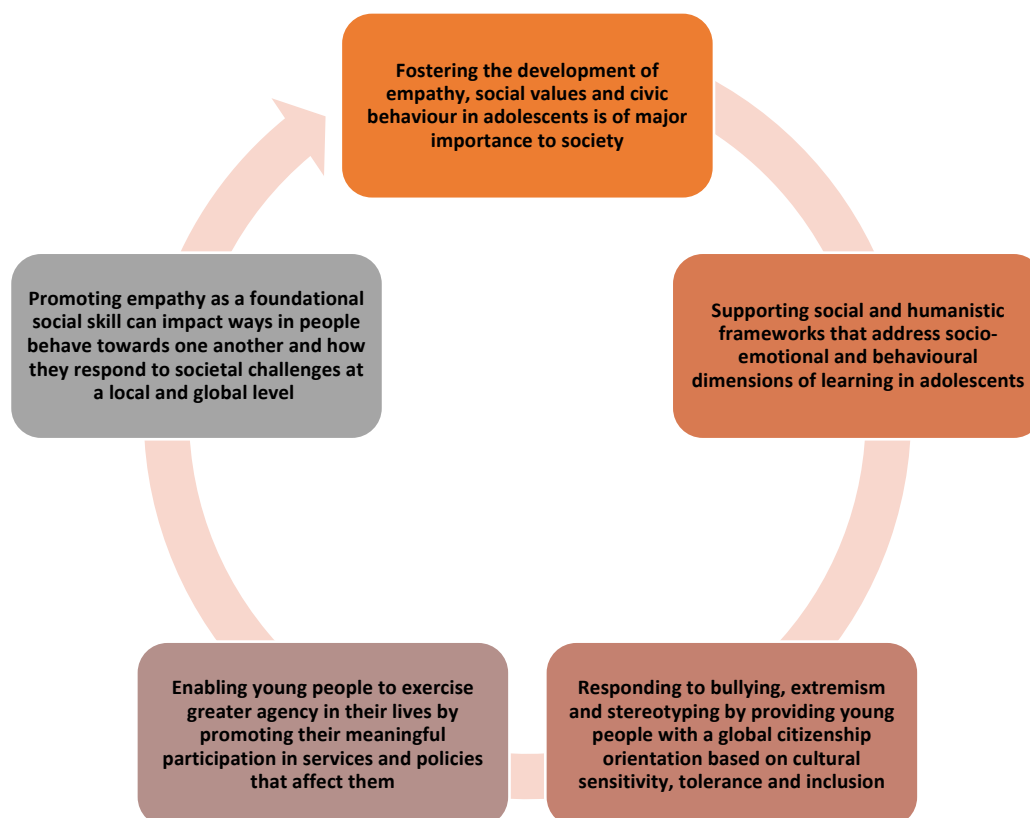
The Observatory will work with the three-phase model for research development, evaluation and implementation below.



The functions are:

- To act as a clearing house for research-based, evidence-informed policy and practice
- To incubate pilot programs, supporting implementation and cultural adoption of innovative youth policies, solutions and practices
- To serve as an ‘outreach hub’ to share knowledge and build capacity across countries.

## Guiding Principles



## The Benefits

Over time the Observatory will be beneficial in three ways. First, it will foster the **enablement of more compassionate and caring societies** including for those youth and their families living in troubled environs and/or fragile states i.e., leading to less ‘othering’, less racial profiling, decreased antisemitism, reduced hate speech, less narcissism, and selfishness. It will help the creation of compassion, increased levels of communities who care, a greater understanding of the ‘other’ and identification with their plight and need, and most simply more willingness to engage and help.

Second, apart from developing to scale **a cadre of empathy educated youth across countries continents and borders** (and future decision makers leaders and designers of society), the Observatory will enable youth solutions and initiatives to **address social problems, for social good, through social action**. We foresee the creation of this knowledge as impacting on international policy and enabling dialogue between evidence informed and civically engaged youth (many of whom were previously voiceless) and their politicians and public

representatives - for example through International Summer Symposia and specially convened UNESCO Chairs Youth to Politician Think Tanks!

Third, through its visibility internationally (via the UNESCO Chairs and other partner networks), it will be grounded in contemporary challenges and quality assured in terms of its applicability in the real world across the designated countries in which the project takes place. The observatory will *ensure the country responses remain framed within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* including targets for poverty eradication, quality education, social inclusion, peace and sustainability. We will demonstrate *Social Return on Investment* approaches quantify the social, economic and environmental value created not just for youth and their families and communities, but for civic society.

### ***Framework***

This overarching framework for the Observatory is presented below.



### ***In-country Sites***

The potential exists to adapt the empathy education research and programmatic interventions across a number of international contexts. These include engaging with young people in fragile and conflict-affected states, with refugees undergoing forced displacement and with out-of-school children and young people. Subject to funding, a number of opportunities have been identified through global partners and networks as priority areas of work for 2024. The six examples provided below are indicative of the ongoing work and potential for the project.

**Ukraine/Poland:** The Chairs has established ongoing contacts with Professor Anna Odrowąż-Coates UNESCO Janusz Korczak Chair, at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw with a view to collaborating on programs that address the needs of children and young people affected by violence and war. In particular, a project based on the experience of Polish and Ukrainian youth committed to building coalitions and networks among like-minded youth to advance tolerance and non-discrimination and to design, implement and activities in their local communities has resonance for other countries seeking to support the inclusion and integration of Ukrainian youth.

**United States and Europe (Holocaust and Past Violence Education):** The Chairs are working closely with the UNESCO Office of Holocaust Education and the Education Division of the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, and related partners to imbed empathy education in Holocaust and past violence education. This work will meet a variety of outcomes, such as decreasing antisemitism, countering hate speech, promoting acceptance and tolerance, and engaging youth in research that documents survivors as well as challenges intolerance. The work will also have broader impacts in that it will help reshape teaching and action around all types of intolerance (gender, religious, political, sexual orientation, race). Program interventions are currently being tested and will be rolled out in the US and Europe in 2024.

**Iraq:** Close links have been established with the UNESCO Chair in Education for Peacebuilding and Human Rights at the University of Ulster, Professor Kelsey Shanks. The Ulster Chair is working in Iraq on programs targeted at post-conflict stabilization and in promoting a culture of peace. In a context where post-conflict communities look inward and the tendency is for ‘othering’ of different groups, the Chairs have identified the potential role of empathy education in developing targeted programs for working with Iraqi youth. Areas of focus include empathy education and societal reintegration of child combatants; the position of minority groups in Iraq, stereotyping and conflict narratives.

**South Africa:** The Chairs and team has an ongoing relationship with the Making a Difference in Leadership Foundation in South Africa. The Foundation supports young South Africans facing economic and social barriers with educational access and opportunities to reach their full potential as future leaders of South Africa. Alongside education and employability, key elements of the programs include development of youth leadership skills for agency and resilience and cultivation of social awareness. Planning is underway with the Chairman, Francois Pienaar, and Director Helette Pieterse for the integration of the Irish developed ASE youth empathy education component, grounded in cultural understanding as an added element to their youth skills development initiative.

**Northern Ireland:** While there is peace in Northern Ireland, with both Brexit and the UK’s departure from the EU, it remains fragile and nowhere more so than among certain youth populations who are being influenced by paramilitary groups. In addition, less than 10% of Protestant and Catholic youth in Northern Ireland attend school together. The UNESCO Chair at Queens University of Belfast in collaboration with the Chairs are seeking to introduce empathy education in schools as a model to aid and fasten mutual respect and understanding and as a legacy peace building tool in Northern Ireland.

**United Kingdom:** Our Voices University Network (OVUN)– Reducing Sexual Violence of Young People. OVUN is a global network of multi-disciplinary researchers from universities and (I)NGOs. Committed to ethical, child-centered research to improve identification, prevention and response efforts for children and young people affected by sexual violence, the Chairs have been on the board of the group for three years. The OVUN shares learning and builds global knowledge to improve evidence with and about children and young people

affected by sexual violence and aims to influence and improve related practice and policy across a range of disciplines and contexts. Empathy education in relation to the plight of victims is lacking particularly among peer groups and the intention is to seek capacity to introduce the ASE program through the OVUN network.

## Background Information



Professor **Pat Dolan** holds the prestigious UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement, the first to be awarded in the Republic of Ireland. The UNESCO Chair delivers a comprehensive program of work towards the objective of promoting civic engagement and leadership skills among children and youth. He is co-founder of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre and Global Network for Children, Youth and Communities. Prof. Dolan is Director of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the University of Galway. Prof Dolan has completed an extensive body of research on children youth and family issues including longitudinal research on adolescents and has over 100 peer reviewed academic publications. His research interests include Civic Engagement, Empathy, Family Support, Youth Mentoring Models, and Resilience and Social Support theory. Prof. Dolan has extensive practice and policy experience, both nationally and internationally.



Professor **Mark Brennan** holds the UNESCO Chair for Community, Leadership, and Youth Development at the Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Brennan's teaching, research, writing, and program development concentrate on the role of civic engagement, community, and leadership development in the youth and community development process. His work has also increasingly focused on the role of citizens across the lifespan as active contributors to peace building, social justice, and functioning societies. Dr. Brennan has over 30 years of experience in designing, conducting, and analysing social science research related to community and youth development. He is co-founder of the Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Children, Youth, and Community. All of his research outputs have been translated into teaching and outreach curriculum to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to a wider international audience, as well as published over 150 peer reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, UN publications and Outreach publications.



Irish actor **Cillian Murphy** has worked closely with both UNESCO Chairs as patron of the UNESCO Child and Family Research at the University of Galway. His commitment to the work of the Centre stems from a shared interest in empowering young people to actively engage in their communities and in the role of empathy in fostering social responsibility and building young people's capacity to influence change on issues that matter to them. In support of the *Activating Social Empathy* education program, he co-edited *IONBHÁ: The Empathy Book For Ireland* launched in October 2022.