

UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative: Empowering Young People in Racial Healing, Community Regeneration and Systemic Transformation Towards Social Justice and Human Flourishing

The UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative

The UNESCO [Collective Healing Initiative](#) has been developed under the direction and leadership of the [UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples](#) (formerly Slave Route Project), and carried out in partnership with [Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace](#), and [Global Humanity for Peace Institute](#), University of Wales Trinity St David. Its ongoing work is supervised by an [Advisory Board](#) appointed by the UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples Project.

In furthering this Initiative, in 2018-2020, a series of [symposia](#) were held with international experts and extended [desk review and case studies](#) were launched to explore questions central to collective healing. The [research](#) pointed out that harms of this historical atrocity (e.g. transatlantic slavery, European colonialism and colonisation), and the continued legacies of brutality have been perpetuated through institutionalised racism, capitalist exploitation, social exclusion, and gender discrimination. The research also highlighted two significant approaches key to addressing transgenerational trauma and racial inequality: The first a well-being focused approach that affirms and dignifies the relevant communities and their experiences. This approach is strength-based, acknowledges the collective nature of trauma and healing, and locates healing in holistic well-being. The second is a systemic approach that recognises structural dehumanisation at the root of collective trauma. It suggests that addressing harms to peoples and communities and advancing people's well-being must involve transforming the root causes of such harms.

Decoloniality

The ethics of decoloniality and pluriversality provide an important values-framework for engaging with the younger generations. The decolonial ethic highlights our shared responsibilities in co-creating a humane world where all can flourish, including diverse peoples, groups, communities, and other sentient beings in the cosmos. This cosmological vision suggests an interconnected and interdependent way of being beyond pre-imposed cultural, socio-economic and political boundaries. Decolonial and pluriversal values reject individualism as well as universalism. Instead, they advocate localised cosmopolitanism that cherishes difference, encounter, listening and dialogue.

Empowering Young People

Thus the Collective Healing Initiative regards peoples and communities who have experienced collective trauma as themselves the change agents and who can participate in and contribute to systemic transformation and holistic well-being. To enable such an active participation and contribution, it requires cultivating an awareness of culture, system and wider environment as anchor for life's purpose, meaning, and self-identification, especially for younger generation. It also needs to develop a shared understanding of the necessary structural conditions for justice, dignity, and meaningful social action.

Drawing on [UNESCO Medium-Term objectives](#), including Africa, gender equality and youth empowerment, and the Routes of Enslaved Peoples' new strategy focusing on knowledge production, memory sites and antiracism, the Collective Healing Initiative emphasises on the significant role of young people, especially young women, in engaging in community regeneration and systemic transformation towards racial justice and human flourishing.

The Imperative of Intergenerational Inquiry

The partners of the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative believe that to address historical trauma, seek relational restoration, and aspire for systemic transformation, it requires youth-led or youth-initiated intergenerational inquiries in the transatlantic communities. These inquiries are rooted in the value of 'Sankofa', an African myth that stresses the importance of remembering the past, and recovering and restoring the wisdom and knowledge accumulated from the previous generations to benefit the present, and guide the journey into the future.

Intergenerational inquiry can enable the community to reintegrate histories, reconnect with traditional wisdom and cultural and spiritual practices of resilience and caring, and re-story promising human futures. Furthermore, intergenerational inquiry is a key to humanity's becoming whole, experiencing well-being, ending these cycles of destruction, and regenerating conditions for ecological flourishing. Hence the intergenerational inquiry aims to:

- 1.** explore community histories and lived realities connected to the transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial capitalist legacies
- 2.** avoid over-simplifying cultural traditions and stereotyping the experiences of formerly enslaved and formerly colonised
- 3.** gather stories of strengths, cultural wisdom and indigenous (spiritual) practices of resilience, resistance, and regeneration
- 4.** re-connect with these place-based 'treasures' as the starting point for the journey of collective healing, well-being, justice, and co-flourishing with nature
- 5.** re-story a vision for a more humane and caring world

The Intergenerational Inquiry particularly empowers young people to initiate and enter into dialogue with the community's elders. The methodologies for intergenerational inquiry will be co-created with young people who will be supported by local organisations and international partners. The young people will also be guided by scholars and researchers in terms of how to apply decolonial values and the arts of listening and dialogue in capturing narratives, documenting them, and presenting and disseminating emergent stories of resilience, resistance, restoration and regeneration.

Youth-Led Political Process

Collective healing, social justice, and holistic well-being is a political process as much as a grassroots endeavour. As a political process, it engages social policies, institutional practices, and decision-making. Through engaging in intergenerational inquiries, young people can examine, analyse and identify structural conditions that perpetuate traumas in the first place, and imagine and re-story systemic transformation necessary for promising human futures. This political process is located in embodied, culturally enriched, spiritual responses to trauma. Somatic, emotional, ethical, and spiritual practices of healing and well-being help liberate younger generations from being defined by traumas and alienation. Young people are empowered to lead and partake in loving and caring political action.

Co-Creation

Local organisations are collaborating in launching pilot intergenerational inquiries in communities in the US, the Caribbean, Colombia, the Netherlands, and Africa. Each partner will identify 5 young people aged (19-35) who will join the collective healing initiative coordinating team in co-creating and co-developing the methodologies for intergenerational inquiry, with the view to launch the pilot in September. Through the support of local organisations and international partners, young people will practise the arts of listening and dialogue, collect stories, synthesise narratives, develop themes, and shared learnings more widely. The wisdom, knowledge and practices thus emerged will also serve the basis for community-based healing/well-being workshops and policy recommendations.

Multi-Site Pilots

Four sites have been identified with four different local partners to start the pre-pilot and pilots.

(1) Susila Dharma International (a spiritually inspired NGO) will start the pre-pilot in two sites in Colombia: (a) Amanecer, an intentional community in La Tebaida, Quindio; (b) an Afro-community, in Cali. Two groups of young people will implement intergenerational inquiries.

(2) Initiatives of Change (IofC), Richmond, VA will support a group of young people to launch intergenerational inquiries in Richmond in September. The organisation has many years of experiences in racial healing, trustbuilding and community regeneration.

(3) Creators of Peace (CoP) will support young women in the Netherlands, and the UK to launch intergenerational inquiries. CoP has been offering peace circles in worldwide communities for 35 years. Aimed at empowering women to become peacebuilders/peacemakers.

(4) Sierra Leone has two possible sites. (a) Freetown, encouraged by the UNESCO ICCAR coordinator, Freetown is interested in supporting a group of young people to take part in the project. (b) University of Sierra Leone's students in the history department are interested.

Community Benefits

Intergenerational inquiries empower young people and nurture their leadership capacities, they can also introduce wider benefits through processes of sharing, caring and community-building, including:

- Re-connecting with community's and ancestral stories of (unimagined) possibilities
- Re-instilling a culture of intergenerational listening, learning and healing
- Cultivating and enriching lasting congenial relationships amongst diverse peoples and groups
- Catalysing public dialogue for inclusive, participatory and equitable decision-making
- Regenerating community
- Contributing to building a global movement for collective and social healing and well-being

Research or Co-Inquiry Opportunities

To better understand the values of intergenerational inquiries, and to learn more about how young people can be empowered to take meaningful political action, research is necessary. Given the values of this project, it is important that any research must be co-creative, collaborative and participatory. It requires challenging western assumptions and concepts, including truth, objectivity, data, validity, and claim, and re-centring on the localised approaches to knowing, seeing and valuing, including respecting emplaced and indigenous voices and perspectives of knowledge-making and future-making.

An aspiration for research in the context of multi-site intergenerational inquiries is to launch co-inquiries alongside the pilots. Co-inquiry as research with the young people, and with others in the community reflects decolonial practices adopted by worldwide researchers, including enacting critical reflexivity, empowering self-determination, embracing pluriversality and diverse ways of knowing, and embodying a transformative praxis.ⁱ

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

--- James Baldwin ("As Much Truth As One Can Bear," The New York Times, 1962)

ⁱ Thambinathan, V., & Kinsella, E. A. (2021). Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766>