

LOOKING BACK

Extract from *UNESCO on the Eve of its Fortieth Anniversary*, 1985

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THE CREATION OF UNESCO AND THE EARLY YEARS

The Organization of Intellectual Co-operation, which was set up between the two world wars and was given its final status as a subsidiary organ of the League of Nations in 1931, can be considered as having foreshadowed UNESCO. It was composed of a governing body, the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, an executive organ, the International Institute on Intellectual Co-operation, the International Film Institute and the National Committees. The major difference, however, was that it did not deal with education, for the proposal to include that particular field in its attributions was rejected as possibly entailing infringement on an area falling within the province of national sovereignty. It was, in actual fact, the disappointment which this decision aroused among educationists that led the Council of the Institute Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the University of Geneva to set itself up, in 1929, as the International Bureau of Education (IBE). On the other hand, the origins of UNESCO can be traced to the field of education.

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves once more that UNESCO came into being as a result of the initiative taken by R. A. Butler, Chairman of the Board of Education of the United Kingdom, and Sir Malcolm Robertson, Chairman of the British Council, to invite the ministers of education of the allied countries, some of whom had chosen to leave their own countries and go into exile, to meet in a war-torn city during the most terrifying conflict that mankind had ever known. These men, who were members of governments which had to bear the crushing burden of pursuing the struggle until victory, decided in 1942⁽¹⁾ to form a Conference of Allied Ministers of Education. Through its very existence and through the spirit which sustained it, the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education, which was to be UNESCO's starting point, was a manifestation of a general climate of hope.

It would, however, be unfair not to observe that the initial objectives were of a limited and practical nature: to assist and strengthen educational institutions set up for the allied countries in the United Kingdom, and to identify the needs which these countries would have after the war when the time came for rebuilding their education systems. It should be recalled that the observers invited to take part in the proceedings of the Conference did not participate immediately: the United States, for instance, only joined in the Conference in March 1944. Furthermore, there were a number of differences of opinion which came to light in respect of the choice of the working language: the choice of English as the sole international language, and even in the purposes of education in the allied countries, had been contemplated until a compromise was reached on the basis of the use of both English and French. The idea of setting up an international organization specializing in education gained ground and a significant step was achieved when a proposal made by the Frenchman René Cassin was accepted, whereby a select committee should be set up to examine three studies, two of which had been undertaken by the United States of America and the United Kingdom respectively. Both of these

⁽¹⁾ The ministers involved were those of the United Kingdom, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Yugoslavia and a Representative of the French National Committee, who were joined by observers from Australia, Canada, China, India, the Union of South Africa and the United States of America.

proposals, in addition to the differences between them, displayed a number of common features: both were destined to promote the establishment of a new international body which would contribute, through education, to the maintenance of peace; to remove from school curricula any features which would be likely to inculcate hostile feelings and attitudes towards other countries, and to include content which would be likely to bring them closer together; to set up a research and information centre which would be responsible for organizing exchanges, meetings and the dissemination of publications; to move towards a degree of harmonization between the national education systems, with due respect for national sovereignty.

Thus at a very early stage the Committee combined its practical concern for the task of assisting in educational reconstruction with that of establishing an international body which would look after educational and cultural matters. There can be no doubt that the Committee's discussions and its conclusions were largely influenced by the precedent of the Organization of Intellectual Co-operation of the League of Nations and by the approach adopted by the International Bureau of Education, which had functioned in Geneva between the two world wars. In this way, the main lines of the future organization were gradually worked out, on the basis of the proposals of the participating governments. The decision was taken to convene an extraordinary Conference, which would be attended by the participating countries on an equal footing with one vote for each, for the purpose of agreeing on the creation of an international organization that would take charge of educational and cultural concerns during the reconstruction period. This preparatory Conference met from 1 to 16 November 1945, hence after the coming into force on 24 October 1945 of the United Nations Charter, whose Article 57 made provision for the establishment of 'Specialized Agencies'. The Conference was convened jointly by the Governments of the United Kingdom and France. Forty-four countries were represented ⁽²⁾, the United States of America sending the largest delegation. The document that served as the basis of the work of the Conference consisted of a preliminary draft prepared by the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education to which were added various proposals from other governments and from a number of organizations and institutions. The preliminary draft prepared by the Conference of Allied Ministers proposed the establishment of an education and cultural organization. The preliminary draft presented by France was entitled 'Constitution of the United Nations Organization of Intellectual Co-operation'. This document contained a number of basic principles whose validity has been borne out by forty years' experience. It also drew attention to a number of problems and differences which were to crop up later at various points in the life of the Organization.

While there was immediate agreement on the ultimate goals of the Organization that was to be created – that is, peace, the common welfare of mankind, international understanding and respect for human rights – it did not take long for the first dilemma to present itself; should the Organization be established as a technical body, like the International Labour Organization, or should it have an ideological and ethical orientation? It was the second option that prevailed, vindicating the desire to put intellectual co-operation and education at the service of peace and understanding among peoples. The first paragraph of the preamble of the Constitution, 'It is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed', which owes its success to its felicitous wording, expressed perfectly the idea advanced by the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, put into words by the American Archibald MacLeish and shared by the whole Conference. The President of the Conference, Miss Ellen Wilkinson, Minister of Education for England and Wales and head of the Delegation of the United Kingdom, expressed this aspiration when she said: 'Our watchword is 'educate so that the minds of the people shall be attuned to peace'; and the head of the French Delegation, Léon Blum, declared that the ultimate aim of the future organization would be 'to create an international atmosphere of confidence and peace, to create the spirit of peace throughout the world'. This concept is expressed in the Constitution, which provides that the

⁽²⁾ Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Liberia, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Union of South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, Venezuela and Yugoslavia.

purposes and functions of UNESCO are 'to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for [...] human rights and fundamental freedoms [...] without distinction of race, sex, language or religion', and which declares that 'a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind'. The preamble of the Constitution also includes an economic and social goal, 'the common welfare of mankind', which broadly coincides with the objectives of development – a concept which had not yet taken hold. Jaime Torres Bodet, head of the Mexican Delegation and Director-General of UNESCO from 1948 to 1952, drew attention at the time to the inequalities which existed between the different groups of countries and raised in strong terms the problem of illiteracy, thereby opening up horizons which were to occupy a major place in the Organization's action.

The preliminary drafts submitted to the Preparatory Conference made no mention of science as one of the spheres of competence of the Organization. It was Miss Ellen Wilkinson, in her statement of her delegation's position at the opening session, who suggested that the title of the Organization should include the word 'science', thereby laying emphasis on the prospect of new discoveries and on the need to link scientists with the 'humanities' so that they should feel aware of their responsibilities. While some delegations remarked that science was implicitly part of culture, the word 'science' did not appear in the title of the new Organization, whose spheres of competence might be defined as follows: mutual knowledge and understanding between peoples especially through the means of mass communication; education and the dissemination of culture, the development of educational action in the Member States in order to bring about the gradual achievement of equality of educational opportunity for all; research and the application of methods best suited to prepare the young people of the world for the responsibilities of freedom; the maintenance, increase and diffusion of knowledge through the protection of the cultural heritage of mankind, the exchange of persons, material and documentation, through wide access for all peoples to the publications produced by any of them.

This new formula marked a considerable advance in the conception of international co-operation which had hitherto been confined for the main part to bilateral relations in fields of education and culture. In defining the nature and functions of the responsible organs of the Organization, it was necessary to decide upon the role to be played by governments. The precedent of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, which had included such eminent representatives from the various fields of knowledge as Einstein, Freud, Salvador de Madariaga or Paul Valéry, influenced some delegations. While not rejecting the principle of the intergovernmental character of the new Organization, these delegates tended to give considerable importance to educational, scientific or cultural organizations and institutions independent of political power. Furthermore, some feared that an organization of an intergovernmental type might be impeded in its operation by the emergence of blocs which would make more difficult the mutual co-operation and understanding implicit in the ideals being pursued. On the other hand, many felt that it was inevitable that the Organization must necessarily be intergovernmental, since legal and economic power belongs to governments, and the role of an organization administered by individuals with no real political standing might never get beyond the stage of philosophizing, discussion and wishful thinking. The French preliminary draft proposed that the delegations to the General Conference should be made up of a maximum of three representatives of the government of each Member State, of a maximum of five representatives from each National Co-operating body, these representatives being chosen from persons exercising responsibilities in the arts, literature, science, technology, political science and the information media, and of one representative from each of the world associations with an intellectual vocation recognized or admitted by the Organization. There would thus be a majority for the representatives of the intellectual community. This proposal was not adopted, but it was decided as a concession that the members of the Executive Board, elected by the General Conference from the government delegates, should be chosen as far as possible from among qualified figures in the fields of the arts, literature, science, education and the dissemination of learning. Two years later, at the second session of the General Conference, held in

Mexico City in 1947, the Delegation of the United States of America raised the question of whether the members of the Executive Board should be elected in a personal capacity or as representatives of their respective governments. This question was to receive an answer at the General Conference, at its eight session, held in Montevideo in 1954, where it was decided that each member of the Executive Board 'represents the government of the State of which he is a national' and that 'only a delegate nominated by the government of the State of which he is a national for election to the Executive Board may stand for election'. The General Conference was also to decide, at its nineteenth session in 1976, that 'when exceptional circumstances arise, which in the considered opinion of the represented State, make it indispensable for its representative to be replaced, even if he does not tender his resignation', the Executive Board should proceed with the replacement of this member on the nomination of the Government of the State the former member represented. UNESCO was therefore created as an organization of States, with three separate organs: the General Conference, the Executive Board and the Secretariat, directed by a Director-General elected by the General Conference, the Constitution defining their respective roles.

INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTION – THE EARLY YEARS

After the Constitution had been drawn up, the second task of the Preparatory Conference was to set up a commission responsible for convening the first General Conference of UNESCO, working out its agenda and preparing studies and recommendations for the formulation of the programme and budget. The Executive Secretary of the Commission, Julian Huxley, who was to become the first Director-General of UNESCO, accordingly undertook the task of writing a paper on how the ideals and objectives set forth in the Constitution might be planned and carried out in the UNESCO programmes. This study, published under the title *UNESCO – Its Purpose and its Philosophy*, went over certain principles and sought to define the scope of the Organization's programme for future years. Revealing the immense culture of its author in all fields of knowledge, this study was a valuable contribution to UNESCO's initial activities and it throws a clear light on the Organization's later action. However, Huxley was not followed when he considered that 'UNESCO needs a working philosophy, a working hypothesis concerning human existence and its aims and objects, which will at least indicate a definite line of approach to its problems. Without such a general outlook and line of approach, UNESCO will be in danger of undertaking piecemeal and even self-contradictory actions, and will in any case lack the guidance and inspiration which spring from a belief in a body of general principles.' He therefore proposed for UNESCO a philosophy exempt from all sectarianism (which would have been 'contrary to its charter and essence'), but which was instead global and universal, founded on a world humanism which was scientific and evolutionary. Furthermore, Julian Huxley considered that UNESCO must help to build up a common fund of traditions for mankind as a whole and to raise the average level of education, science and culture, in accordance with a gradually unified conception and a series of common aims. Many delegations did not consider it possible to reconcile the principle of a single philosophy for UNESCO with the existing diversity of ideologies and beliefs. The Preparatory Commission decided therefore that Julian Huxley's study should be published as a separate, signed document, expressing only the personal point of view of its author. During the successive sessions of the General Conference UNESCO's basic guidelines have gradually taken shape.

After the deposit of the instrument of ratification of the Constitution by the twentieth signatory State on 4 November 1946, the Constitution entered into force, and on 20 November the first session of the General Conference met in Paris, which had been chosen as the Headquarters of the Organization. Immediately the debates opened, two opposing currents of thought appeared: on the one hand, the partisans of ideology and, on the other, the supporters of a technical conception of the Organization. Thus Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (India) maintained that the essential function of UNESCO was to seek a new way of life, a new conception and a new philosophy which would inspire mankind. Mgr Maroun, the representative of Lebanon, contrasted the Western conception, according to which the mind only expresses itself through intelligence, with the Eastern conception, according to which the mind is both logic and intuition, the light of intelligence and the impulse of

the heart. Mr Ribnikar, the delegate of Yugoslavia, considered the postulate of the Constitution according to which wars being in the minds of men to be contrary to historical experience, thus making it impossible for UNESCO to contribute to peace.

These contradictory interpretations of the aims and functions defined in the Constitution threatened to lead UNESCO into an impasse, and the ideological discussions resumed at the following session of the General Conference held in Mexico City in 1947, where an important statement was made by the head of the French Delegation, Jacques Maritain, which was to have considerable influence on the subsequent action of the Organization and is still largely relevant today. He observed that in the 'Babelism' of contemporary thought there were no common foundations for speculative thought, since it no longer had any common tongue. Jacques Maritain asked how, in the circumstances, an intellectual agreement would be possible between men gathered together precisely in order to accomplish a common intellectual task, when they came from different civilizations and cultures, if not from opposing spiritual backgrounds and schools of thought. He considered that UNESCO had two options: either it could abandon any declaration of common ideas and common principles and content itself with compiling documents, surveys and statistics or, on the contrary, it could 'attempt to establish an artificial conformity of minds and to fix upon a common doctrinal denominator which would be likely, in the course of discussion, to diminish and finally disappear altogether'. However, in view of the fact that UNESCO had a practical goal, he took the view that if agreement between minds could not be reached spontaneously on the basis of common speculative ideas, it might be established instead on 'common practical ideas', not only a conception of the world, of man and of knowledge, but upon the acceptance or affirmation of a single body of beliefs for guidance in action. Although he recognized that this was little enough, he concluded that it was 'the last resort of intellectual agreement', and that it was 'enough to enable a great task to be undertaken'. The debates between the adherents of an ideological or philosophical conception of the Organization and those supporting practical action have continued up to the present day, some being in favour of a predominantly ideological or ethical role and wishing UNESCO to be, in the words of Jaime Torres Bodet, 'the conscience of the United Nations', or even, according to Jawaharlal Nehru's expression, 'the conscience of mankind', while others give priority to its practical role. However, there seems to be no doubt that the idea expressed by Jacques Maritain, in proposing 'common practical ideas' and a body of beliefs for guidance in action, has laid out the course which has enabled UNESCO to render important services in its attempts to satisfy the real needs of Member States, while at the same time conforming to the ethical mission assigned to it by its Constitution.

UNESCO's early activities show, moreover, and this has been confirmed during the whole course of the Organization's action, that there is no conflict between its ethical vocation, its efforts to promote international intellectual co-operation and the practical assistance which it can provide to Member States. A twofold concern was in fact evident from its early years onwards in the projects carried out to assist in creating, developing or renovating education systems and teaching establishments, scientific institutions, museums or libraries, and information services: that of tackling reconstruction work in war-devastated countries or giving priority to the needs of 'underdeveloped' countries – and that of seeking new solutions through the exchange of ideas and information.

The concern, which has constantly been affirmed and emphasized ever since, to correct the most blatant inequalities and to endeavour to bring about a more equitable distribution of knowledge – an eminently ethical concern – while working out concrete means of action, was thus expressed at the same time. It is noteworthy that UNESCO's first activities include not only studies, surveys, expert meetings and the formulation of guidelines and recommendations, the most basic instruments of international intellectual co-operation, but also the beginnings of action in the field. The very first programmes embody concepts which, sometimes after a fairly long eclipse, were to regain their place, and indeed occupy a more considerable place, in UNESCO's work, such as: the struggle against illiteracy, education for all, education for international understanding, peace

and human rights. It is needed remarkable that UNESCO should so soon have identified these areas of activity whose major importance has never been denied and that it should so rapidly have set out such a wide range of different activities and so wide a variety of means of action which already included the award of fellowships, consultants' services, standard-setting instruments, utilization of the capabilities of non-governmental organizations and the establishment of scientific co-operation offices.

Although the very limited financial means then available to UNESCO (\$6,250,000) for the first budget to be approved) were used during that period in the service of only a very few Member States – 44 in 1948 – this variety gave rise to a great dispersion of activities. The first Director-General, Julian Huxley, was not against such dispersion in fact, for he was convinced that UNESCO could play a very effective catalytic role – to use an expression which was often to be used later on – in stimulating action or in multiplying its effects, with often very modest means: a contract, a fellowship or a small subvention. It is true that the second Director-General of UNESCO, Jaime Torres Bodet, resigned at the fifth session of the General Conference in Florence in 1950, having failed to obtain the budgetary increase of approximately \$1,000,000 which he had requested for 1951 (at that time the General Conference met every year), and believing it obvious that the budget of \$8,200,000 voted by the General Conference not only indicated inadequate interest on the part of Member States but would not allow UNESCO to carry out the task incumbent on it. This disproportion between the means, on the one hand, and on the other hand the scope and variety of the tasks entrusted to UNESCO by the will of Member States themselves – increasing in number as the number of Member States increased – was to set UNESCO from the outset the problem of the choice and concentration of activities.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHORS



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