The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created at a founding conference held in London in November 1946, when representatives of 44 countries adopted the UNESCO constitution which was then open for signature by any state wishing to join the Organization. By the end of 1946, there were 28 Member States; the number rose to 59 in 1950, and in 1982 reached 155.

In origin, UNESCO belongs to the group of intergovernmental bodies set up after the Second World War in the wake of the United Nations. The members are states, not simply ministries (as had been the case earlier with the International Bureau of Education). The form of governance worked out initially has continued to the present – a compromise arrangement for an autonomous body which nevertheless forms part of a larger system. In structure, UNESCO is composed of three organs. A General Conference of delegates from all Member States meets as a sovereign body every two years to decide policy and to adopt a programme and budget which, in principle at least, are binding on the respective governments. Certain responsibilities are delegated to a more restricted Executive Board (in 1982 comprising 45 members) that meets in regular session twice a year. The third organ is the Secretariat, headed by a Director-General appointed by the General Conference, and composed of a body of selected international civil servants. The successive executive heads of UNESCO have been: Julian Huxley (1946-48), Jaime Torres Bodet (1948-52), Luther Evans (1953-58), Vittorio Veronese (1958-62), René Maheu (1962-74), and Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow (1974- ). The Secretariat provides the continuity of the Organization, making proposals to the governing bodies and carrying out the approved programme. It has been established in Paris since 1947.

UNESCO also forms part of the United Nations system. As a specialized agency of the United Nations with a particular field of competence, it makes an annual report to the economic and social council of the United Nations: the executive heads of the several agencies, including UNESCO’s Director-General, meet periodically with the Secretary-General of the United Nations in the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) to work on those problems, policies, and procedures which are of common concern.

The UNESCO constitution contains an excellent expression of the principles underlying international cooperation in education. The motives shared by the signatory states are that they believe “in full and equal opportunities of education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge”. Accordingly, these states created UNESCO “for the purpose of advancing, through the educational, scientific, and cultural relations of the peoples of the world the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind for which the United Nations was established and which its Charter proclaims”. The basic text also outlines the functions the Organization is expected to perform: to collaborate in the work of advancing mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples; to give a fresh impulse to popular education and the spread of culture; and to maintain, increase, and diffuse knowledge.

1 A crisis occurred in UNESCO affairs at the end of 1983, when the United States gave notice of intention to withdraw from the Organization. The consequences of such an event, as well as the deep-seated causes giving rise to it, are not reflected in this article; but perhaps the historical perspective provided will be the best approach to understanding present issues.
1. THE FIRST DECADE

When the UNESCO Constitution is compared with earlier attempts to organize international co-operation in educational affairs, three conclusions emerge. First, the principle of national sovereignty in matters educational and cultural remains entrenched; there was no intention to set up a supranational authority, but rather an organization which would serve Member States "at their request", as the phrase went. Next, there was a considerable advance in fixing fields of competence: while education was central to UNESCO's work, science, culture, and communication were also included, not so much as discrete areas but as essential aspects of action to reach the aims. The interdependence of these four ways of looking at human enterprise has perhaps, with time and growing complexity, become somewhat obscured. Third, it may be noted that the general goals posed a number of dilemmas when programmes had to be prepared: should the Organization work directly for world peace (and if so, how?), or should it do so indirectly through intellectual co-operation? Are activities directed to peace and to the common welfare of humankind of the same order? The early years of UNESCO saw a good deal of debate around these questions, as a programme had to be shaped which provided for intellectual cooperation. This meant bringing together educators, scientists, and artists of different backgrounds on some common ground – very often through non-governmental mechanisms – and at the same time advancing human welfare, which meant, in terms of action, helping governments or official institutions to extend and improve their services.

In its simplest terms the argument was whether UNESCO should have an academic, institutional character or should have the action-oriented nature of an official administration. During the first decade, the funds provided for the regular programme being limited, the gap between aspirations of either kind and the achievements of the Organization were painfully apparent. From the founding principles it was easy to propose and justify almost any project which would gain support from some governments; and the resulting proliferation of projects, mostly small, led to increasing demands for rationalization by concentrating the programme around a few themes of major importance. Thus, in the 1956-57 period, major projects were launched: training of teacher educators and administrators in Latin America; mutual understanding between East and West; research on arid lands; reading materials for new literates. Such problem-centred themes should have had interdisciplinary incidences, but it turned out that the growing Secretariat shaped itself into a traditional pattern-education, sciences (natural and social), culture, and communication becoming departments which produced programmes limited by disciplinary considerations.

With limited regular funds contributed by the Member States, the Organization was naturally sensitive to the possibility of added resources. These progressively emerged through the policy debates and decisions of the United Nations. The idea of technical assistance, launched in 1949, led the next year to the setting up of an expanded programme with funds contributed voluntarily by governments to the United Nations. Through actively championing the view that education is essential for economic and social development, UNESCO ensured that part of these funds could be devoted to projects within its fields of competence.

2. CONSOLIDATION AROUND THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT: THE 1960s

At the outset of the 1960s, the basic ideas were reflected in a resolution adopted by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, which "recognized that education was not only an essential factor in economic development but also an indispensable element in the consolidation of results achieved". In advocating this approach, the UNESCO General Conference accepted the principle of integrated programming, by which regular and extra-budgetary resources were merged. A series of important steps ensued. In 1960, the United Nations set up a special fund to support institution building in developing countries on a more massive and continuous basis than by the parallel technical assistance projects. Here, too, UNESCO was able to show that institutions – in particular colleges for training secondary-school teachers – should benefit from such help.
In 1961, the United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) governing body agreed that funds devoted to improving the welfare of children could be used in part for education at the basic level. Later, in 1964, the World Bank decided to extend its financial activities to education by granting loans for the construction and equipment costs of technical schools (where the link to development needs was most obvious) and subsequently broadened the aspects of education which qualified for loans or credits. That these programmes within the orbit of the United Nations accepted education as a legitimate field for support was the result of the prevailing debate on the nature of development, but was due, to some extent at least, to the political and professional influence of UNESCO. The concept of development as well as the fresh resources were to have profound effects in turn on the working of UNESCO.

These new funds were placed at the disposal of developing countries for projects they wished to launch to enhance development. Where national authorities decided on educational action, UNESCO became the executing agency (in the case of the United Nations Development Programme), or a partner in the design and the supply of technical assistance (as with the World Bank and UNICEF). The orientation was to projects which could be clearly defined by objectives, forecast in terms of means, and costed. In theory, the development programme of the country concerned was the decisive factor; the financing agency and the specialized agency, by virtue of special agreements between the two, would then provide the external support needed for carrying out the project. In practice, it was never easy for the leaders of a young country to view national development as an integrated whole, in which needs could be prioritized in the form of projects supported by outside resources. Moreover, the financial agencies, both international and bilateral, tended to establish policies of their own, giving precedence to certain forms or areas of action. In turn, the specialized agencies each working in a particular field where education and training components were viewed in a sectoral light, did not always find it easy to harmonize their approaches.

These problems came to the fore in the 1960s. UNESCO, for its part, consolidated a large part of its programme during the decade and took steps to relate its educational activities more closely to the needs of the Member States.

The first step was the organization of regional conferences of ministers of education – at times alongside the financial or planning agencies of the countries concerned. An Asian Conference held in 1960 in Karachi was followed in the next two years by conferences in the Arab States, Africa, and Latin America, and the practice was established of repeating each of them every six years or so. The circle of regional meetings was completed in 1967 with the first European Ministers’ Conference. It is true that, in a regional forum, conditions and problems are more homogeneous than at a worldwide level, so that exchanges become easier and proposals for action more practical. The first conferences in the 1960s proposed long-term, ambitious plans – for achievement of universal primary education within a region by a given date, for instance – but they soon settled down to a more problem-centred, thematic agenda.

One effect of these regional meetings was that they focused attention on what UNESCO was doing in the region, the operational programme, and produced a number of proposals for action by the Organization. To develop regional activities in a given field, such as teacher education, adult education, promotion of better school facilities, or the training of administrators and planners, meant that some kind of institution had to be created. A number of these regional programmes came into existence during the 1960s. Alongside them, again starting in Asia, Regional Offices for Education were set up as outposts of the central Secretariat: Bangkok in 1961; Havana, later transferred to Santiago, in 1964; an African Regional Office in Dakar in 1970; and one for the Arab States in Beirut in 1963. Since many regional centres for training and research in specific fields required an infrastructure that was too costly to justify independent status, some of them were taken over by the host country concerned but continued to provide services to other countries of the region, while in other cases the programme was absorbed into the more generalized regional office.
The tendency to decentralize, arising from the rapidly growing field programme, was tempered by the strong centralizing approach represented by the governance of UNESCO and the administrative style of the Secretariat. Moreover, the very wide range of UNESCO’s possible fields of action – unique in the United Nations system – worked in the same direction: to preserve some kind of unity implied a measure of central conception and control. A definition of the regular programme of UNESCO was given in terms of priorities by the Executive Board in 1965 as: “those areas of educational deficiencies which constitute the greatest bottlenecks of economic and social development, and those aspects that relate to the promotion of human rights and to international understanding”. Aid to development and ethical action served as two of the main functions of UNESCO; they presupposed international intellectual co-operation as the third major long-standing function.

Operational activities provided the regular programme with two dominant themes. The first of these was the planning movement, a consequence of the link established between education and development, and an outcome of the agreement between UNESCO and the World Bank. An important place was found for educational planning in the structure and functions of the Organization, directed mainly towards provision of advisory missions to countries requesting them. A two-tiered system was set up to give the necessary training to educational planners and administrators: courses in each developing region, capped by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), created in Paris in 1963, where research and high-level courses were conducted as a complement to Secretariat activity. The second line of development occurred around the recurrent problem of illiteracy. In place of the earlier, sporadic pilot projects, UNESCO launched the Experimental World Literacy Programme as an outcome of a World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, held in Tehran in 1965 at the invitation of the Government of Iran. The central thrust of the programme was a group of 12 national projects in functional literacy supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), at a total cost of about US$50 million; besides which there were a considerable number of other less ambitious national enterprises. The pooling of experience and special attention to evaluation provided the rationale of the programme; the expectation being that support for literacy work would be mobilized on a worldwide scale, while lessons learnt in the experimental projects would serve to show the most effective means to achieve the end.

The second main direction of the programme came to be termed UNESCO’s ethical action. Projects encouraging education for international understanding, a constant element since the very beginning, were extended towards measures of normative action and standard setting. The 1960 General Conference adopted a convention and recommendation against discrimination in education, as part of the United Nations movement in favour of human rights. While some agencies, notably the International Labour Organization, traditionally worked by means of international standards, UNESCO came late, and cautiously, to this approach. Other instruments were to follow, generally in the form of recommendations: in 1962 (with a revision in 1974) on technical and vocational education; in 1966 on the status of teachers; in 1974 on education for international understanding, co-operation, and peace, and education related to human rights and fundamental liberties; and in 1976 on adult education. These texts constitute the areas of agreement on basic principles and policies in education which the countries of the world subscribe to. They arise from experience in implementing the programme of UNESCO, and very much inform the programme proposals put forward to successive general conferences. When the texts are taken together with the larger body of recommendations adopted by the biennial International Conference on Education convened for UNESCO by the International Bureau of Education (IBE) in Geneva, the full range of UNESCO’s efforts to set educational standards proves to be extensive and of considerable potential value to national policy makers. The actual effect of these international guidelines has not yet been studied.

The third major function of UNESCO - promoting intellectual co-operation – was viewed in the 1960s as an essential element present since the start of the Organization. Although during the decade the generalized
servicing role of the Secretariat, being an educational clearing house, was distributed over several specific fields of action that emerged, the same period saw an extensive series of studies in higher education. These were carried out through a co-operative research programme with the International Association of Universities with support from private foundations. Of the same order, as an outcome of the work done on educational planning, was the publication in 1968 by Philip Coombs of *The World Educational Crisis: A Systems Analysis*.

The tripartite view of the forms of action open to UNESCO which was expressed in the 1960s has been described somewhat fully – in part to trace the growth of the Organization, but also to explain the current situation. One result of the planning movement was to change the way UNESCO's own programmes were shaped. Towards the end of the decade, programming by objectives, rather than by subject areas, was accepted for internal purposes, and a long-term plan was envisaged as a framework for the biennial programmes submitted to the General Conference.

3. **THE 1970s: INNOVATION AND DIFFERENTIATION**

It was in 1976 that the General Conference adopted the first Medium-term Plan (1977-1982) for the Organization. Based on constitutional considerations and lessons learnt over 30 years, the plan identified 10 broad areas of action – two entirely educational and most of the others with educational components. Specific objectives, totalling 44, were set, each with some analysis of the timetable, forms of action, and resource requirements. The Medium-term Plan is a management tool which should permit a better evaluation of the Organization's work; but it demonstrates afresh the issue that confronted UNESCO in 1946: the vast array of problems and needs that occur in education, culture, science, and communication, with resultant demands for international co-operation. To cope with even the most urgent problems, the programme of UNESCO has to be spread extremely thinly.

The significant developments of the 1970s may be summed up in terms of: efforts at promoting reflection, direct services to the Member States, and the search for innovation.

The concentration of attention on major contemporary issues in education took shape with the setting up in 1971 of an ad hoc International Commission on the Development of Education (chaired by Edgar Faure). The report, *Learning to Be*, issued in 1972, made a strong case for lifelong education, which presupposes the goal of a “learning society” and implies the removal of barriers between formal schooling and non-formal education or more informal learning opportunities. Subsequently, a still wider view was taken of UNESCO's role, and the Director-General’s report for 1975-76 states that the Organization should “embark on a process of penetrating reflection on the problems with which mankind is faced, and on the ways UNESCO can help in solving them”. Among the issues which have formed, and continue to serve, as centres of interest for UNESCO attention are: the nature of development (cultural, scientific, and technological factors being included with educational); movement towards change, especially in the search for a new international economic order; and the prospective study of education in the decades ahead. The relationship between education and peace has in the early 1980s become a dominant theme. In dealing with such questions, UNESCO uses the traditional methods of studies, bringing together intellectuals and the concerned institutions, and disseminating the findings. One result of a focus on the intellectual role of the Organization has been to show the importance of communication and information in a new light, and since 1980 the previously neglected communication sector of the programme has acquired greater strength.

In its programme of assistance to Member States – described since the 1970s as co-operation rather than aid, and this is more than a verbal shift – UNESCO has continued along the path already traced. Besides the resources made available for educational projects by the UNDP, World Bank, and UNICEF, various other funds have been created around specific problem areas – population issues, the environment, prevention of drug
abuse, promotion of science and technology — which open opportunities for educational action. Individual countries, too, have used the funds-in-trust formula, providing UNESCO with resources to carry out specified projects. The estimated total of these extra-budgetary resources available to UNESCO for educational purposes in 1981-83 was about US$175 million. The projects involve co-operation with virtually all developing countries and range from support for policy and planning mechanisms to measures for improving school systems (teacher education, curriculum development, and institution building) and on to non-formal education (literacy, adult education, and integrated rural development).

The substantive element in UNESCO’s regular educational programme serves partly to support such field operations and partly to promote wider intellectual co-operation for all Member States. Activities such as conferences and meetings of experts, studies and publications, and pilot projects are undertaken in higher education, general and technical education, planning and administration, and non-formal education, besides the areas of special concern such as equality of opportunity for disadvantaged groups, education for international understanding, and so on. In these substantive matters the Secretariat makes use also of outlying centres: the IBE in Geneva, the IIIEP in Paris, and the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, as well as some regional centres. The total sum available for this regular programme in 1981-83 (i.e. financed by Member States’ dues) was about US$105 million.

One outcome of planned attempts to introduce educational reforms has been a growing attention to innovation in education. UNESCO has reflected this interest in its programme in various ways. Both through studies and through support for experimental and pilot projects at a lower than national level, the Secretariat has fostered an awareness of the growing points in education. A somewhat more formal arrangement has taken shape regionally, with the setting up of regional networks of educational innovation for development; these are operated by the regional offices, and attempt to create linkages between institutions and specialists committed to innovation in the several countries concerned. At the international level, a reporting service maintained by the IBE and the publication of UNESCO’s journal, “Prospects”, provide a certain diffusion of information between regions. It may be noted, in conclusion, that the emphasis on networking techniques around innovation or planned change is a practical way of supporting technical co-operation among developing countries. It corresponds to much of the theory related to development and to the improvement of educational opportunities. It was not yet clear, at the beginning of the 1980s, whether the decentralizing requirement — to work at grass-roots level, and use local, voluntary, and non-governmental mechanisms — would find sufficient support among the states concerned; and in turn, whether the procedures laid down for UNESCO, still so much tied to central national administrations, could be made more flexible and innovative.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**Biography of the Author**

**Leo R. Fernig**

(South Africa)

1946-1948  Editor, Oxford University Press, London.

1948-1952  Programme Specialist, Head of Education Department Clearing House, UNESCO.

1952-1960  Head of Division, Department of Education, (Education through Exchange of Information, Clearing House), UNESCO.

1958-1959  Deputy Director, Department of Education, UNESCO.

1961-1966  Assistant Director, International Co-operation for the Study and Advancement of Education, UNESCO.

1966-1967  Assistant Director, Regional Programmes, Department of School Education, UNESCO.

1967-1970  Director, Department of School and Higher Education and then Director, Department of Advancement of Education, UNESCO.


Author of several publications.