

UNESCO's Outreach to Parliamentarians

by Ahmed Sayyad

Parliamentarians rank among UNESCO's major partners in the promotion of human development and peacekeeping through the various programs the organization is known for including fields such as education, science, culture and communication.

UNESCO's programme for a dialogue with parliamentarians was launched in 1994 to ensure that the Organization's values and objectives are clearly reflected in all national policy-making and legislation. Both as members of civil society and as its elected representatives, parliamentarians are responsible for implementing these national policies and legislation. They introduce the concerns of their electorates into parliamentary debates and adopt lines of action in order to address these issues in the most effective manner.

By facilitating dialogue amongst legislators across all regions, UNESCO aims to reinforce this global network representing civil society and to enhance its ability to resolve global issues in national contexts. In so doing, UNESCO is trying to ensure that globalization can work for all. The programme is open to legislators actively involved in parliamentary institutions and associations at national, regional and international levels. Consequently UNESCO's co-operation is wide-ranging and includes partnerships with national leagues of parliamentarians, regional parliamentary bodies, and international organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

The following are some examples of how the partnership has worked in various countries.

Mexico

- UNESCO and the Mexican committee for education and culture have signed a letter to improve communication and the sharing of information.

Africa

- The recent establishment of the Forum of African Parliamentarians for Education (FAPED) was spearheaded by the parliaments of Senegal and Mauritius and its goal is to develop partnerships through the Education for All Program.

Thailand

- The UNESCO office in Bangkok plans to establish ties between legislators and major regional organizations¹ to develop a cooperative approach to solving problems related to sustainable development.

Israël

- This type of cooperation also existed in Israël, where a commission for future generations will soon be established as part of the Knesset. This was possible thanks to the active participation of the UNESCO national commission and of the Friends of Parliament League.

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Also, other parliamentary bodies will be mobilized as part of UNESCO's action for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, September 2002) and for the World Information Summit in 2003 and 2005.

These examples are just a few illustrations of the prolific action that has resulted from the Co-operation Agreement signed between UNESCO and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1997. This served to define the terms of reference for dialogue so that parliamentarians may be better informed about UNESCO's domains of expertise.²

Globalization with a Human Face

The Millennium Declaration of 2000 that was signed by political leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit took stock of the major issues facing humankind during the 1990's and highlighted the policies implemented worldwide to resolve all crises.

This Declaration has been an important inspiration in the shaping of UNESCO's programme priorities such as the right of all to education, the strengthening of international scientific and intellectual co-operation, the promotion of cultural pluralism, and broadening public access to information.

Specifically, all UNESCO action is oriented towards two key objectives, namely to reduce poverty³ and to provide easier access to knowledge so that globalization no longer means marginalization.

A Round Table was organized as part of this summit to discuss the Dialogue of Civilizations. Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, remarked that intercultural dialogue is essential to furthering peace between nations and peoples.

Thus, the United Nations Millennium Summit ushered in a new era where everyone would learn to live together in what is commonly known as "the global village". This had already been forecast in the Report of the International Commission on Education in the 21st Century set up by UNESCO in 1996 under the chairmanship of Jacques Delors, former President of the European Union. And it is precisely for this type of action that UNESCO needs help from its partners.

The Medium Term Strategy and the Role of Parliamentarians

Cooperation between parliamentarians and UNESCO is essential for the implementation of a medium term strategy focusing on certain priorities, namely education and public access to information, environmental protection,

ethics in the fields of science and technology, as well as cultural diversity. In order to complete its projects, UNESCO will adopt a 3-phase approach.

The first step for the organization is to establish universal principles and norms, based on shared values, a sort of universal code of conduct for living harmoniously in a global world.

UNESCO is justly proud of its many accomplishments in this regard – its conventions in areas such as the preservation of cultural and global heritage, or the international recognition of degrees and diplomas in higher education.

Other declarations made by UNESCO members are also noteworthy such as those pertaining to cultural diversity or the human genome. UNESCO Member States provided valuable assistance to these programmes and to improving certain situations through their willingness to debate subjects of widespread interest. Consequently, parliamentarians are now effective in fighting alongside UNESCO.

The second UNESCO approach is based on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes human dignity, encourages tolerance, and seeks to ensure universal respect for justice, for fundamental rights and freedoms, but also cultural diversity.

Parliamentarians have a vested interest in promoting cultural diversity as a safeguard to equality among all citizens.

And it is precisely this last point that is the focus of UNESCO's second strategic programme because cultural preservation is essential in this era of globalization. It is important to note that several million people are living this reality in their cities, local communities, or even in their workplace.

Today, all states must recognize the ethnic and cultural richness that exists within their borders and everyone must remember that cultural diversity is essential for people to maintain their own culture and identity.

Each and every nation must therefore be committed to building a civic community whose values can be shared by all, without neglecting the differences in languages, art, traditions and religious beliefs. It also goes without saying that any form of discrimination would merely be a source of conflict.

Cultural diversity has been a topic of increased reporting and debate. Furthermore, all legislators agree that the notion of development cannot be dissociated from

that of respect and acceptance of differences. In 1996, the World Commission on Culture and Development tabled a report entitled "Our Creative Diversity", which focused on this very issue.

Another area of UNESCO involvement is exclusion in education (100 million children have no access to primary schooling and 800 million adults are illiterate), in science (the research costs are increasingly affordable to only the wealthiest countries) and in communication (80% of the entire world's population lives without electricity) and this is why the third area of UNESCO involvement stresses citizen participation in what is known as "knowledge-based society".

The prerequisites for this process, which is closely linked with the notions of democracy, justice and development, are equal opportunity, the sharing of knowl-

edge and expertise, access to education for all and the preservation of minority cultures.

In conclusion, increasing capacity goes hand in hand with the notion of diversity since all citizens have huge opportunities to grow thanks to the sharing of knowledge and skills, and this must clearly evolve in a context of respect for human rights, equality, dialogue, peace and tolerance.

Notes

1. Such as ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) or ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific)
2. The capacity to ensure that civil society is involved in public debate is an example thereof.
3. Poverty and exclusion affect 50% of the world's population.