

Ministerial Forum 35th General Conference

The Netherlands

HE Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science

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Key note speech on the future of UNESCO

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

I'm honoured to be one of the keynote speakers at this forum. Thank you very much for inviting me here today.

All of us, as Ministers of Education, Culture and Science, are concerned with building and improving our educational systems, cultural heritage, and scientific community. I hardly need to explain to the assembled audience how important these issues are, nor how important international cooperation is. We are here together today to discuss UNESCO's role in this global collaborative effort. First, though, I'd like to share with you a personal note on education and UNESCO.

A prime example of UNESCO's efforts to preserve cultural heritage is the Memory of the World register. Very recently, Anne Frank's diary was added to the register. When I read her diary I was touched by her enormous thirst for knowledge. This thirst for knowledge is present on almost every page she wrote. During her years in hiding, she could not attend school. Instead, she diligently completed assignments from the textbooks she had with her at home.

This drive to improve oneself – even under the most difficult circumstances - is a universal human desire. A wish shared by everyone.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since so much work must still be done, and since we are discussing children and the opportunities we may provide them, it is essential that we take a critical look at UNESCO. Does it still have the right focus? Are we working as efficiently as we possibly can?

We trust that this General Conference will decide on a comprehensive and forward-looking evaluation of UNESCO's work. The Netherlands is prepared to contribute financially to this evaluation and urges other member states to do the same. However, the majority of the financing for the evaluation should come out of UNESCO's regular budget.

But an evaluation shouldn't prevent us from doing our own thinking about the future of this organization.

I do very much welcome this roundtable discussion as an opportunity to share my thoughts with you about the future of UNESCO.

The point I wish to make is very simple: enormous challenges confront us, and for UNESCO to adequately address them, we will have to fundamentally change how we work.

So I am concentrating here on two points:

- What should UNESCO do?
- How can we best organize ourselves to accomplish this goal?

Let's start with the first question: what UNESCO should do.

In the years since UNESCO was founded, humankind has enjoyed a period of exceptional growth and prosperity. The world population has more than doubled, but at the same time, economic production has increased eightfold.

For the first time in history, it is not just the lucky few who are living in relative wealth. This is now something that hundreds of millions of people can enjoy or aspire to.

The spectacular growth of science and technology and the expanding scope of education are two of the many factors that have made that possible.

However, not everyone benefits from these developments. Millions and millions of children cannot go to school. And the human impact on the natural world has led to unforeseen results, such as climate change and difficult ethical dilemmas.

Most of these challenges will primarily have to be dealt with on a national level. But many require international cooperation. Important objectives of international cooperation are outlined in the Millennium Development Goals. One of these goals is particularly relevant for UNESCO: All boys and girls should get a proper education. I firmly believe that in the coming years, we have to dedicate our full effort to ensure this millennium goal is achieved.

Other examples of challenges for UNESCO are:

- Encouraging scientific research to address global challenges.
- Making results of this research available to all parties that need it.
- Protecting natural and cultural heritage and diversity.

These challenges force us to take a critical look at our organization.

So what should UNESCO do? What should UNESCO's focus be?

Let me give you five general suggestions that might guide us:

The first is: Respect the principle of subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity says that matters should be handled at the lowest possible level. A worldwide organization should therefore perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a regional, national or local level.

The second suggestion: Let civil society handle the things it can do better

International cooperation among scientists is often best served when governments do not interfere. The same is often true for artists and museums. So let's not pretend that UNESCO can do better and let's leave them alone as much as possible to do what they do best.

The third suggestion: Ensure that UNESCO's work complements other international organizations' efforts

The UNESCO mandate overlaps with that of many other international organizations. UNESCO should not duplicate their work, but tailor its activities to complement theirs.

Fourth: Set priorities

All too often we as Member States ask the Secretariat to add another subject to its long list of activities without providing the means to carry out the work. Small wonder, then, that in such cases the results are far from world-class. UNESCO should really confine its efforts to a limited number of tasks that it can do well. It is the results that count and not the number of activities!

The fifth suggestion that might help us to give more focus to UNESCO's tasks is to build upon our strengths.

But what are our strengths? Why is it that certain UNESCO activities are successful and others are not? Why is the IOC so highly esteemed in the outside world, while UNESCO's activities in the field of philosophy are almost invisible? Could it be that the IOC is successful because most Member States believe intergovernmental cooperation in the oceanographic field is a necessity, whereas very few countries are interested in intergovernmental cooperation in the field of philosophy?

This point, the crucial role of the Member States in ensuring the success of UNESCO, brings me to my second and last question:

How should UNESCO organize itself to do what we want it to do?

Can UNESCO effectively do what it needs to accomplish, with the way it is currently organized? My answer is no.

That is not to say that what UNESCO does is useless. On the contrary. I would like to emphasise that much of UNESCO's work is essential and of high calibre. But with regard to the main issues on our agenda, we still fall short of success.

One reason for this is the lack of priorities I mentioned before. By doing too many things at the same time, the organization is stretched so thin that the impact of its activities is diminished.

But there is a more fundamental reason why UNESCO will be unable to adequately address its real agenda if it continues to operate the way it does now.

That reason is the reversal of the relationship between the Secretariat and Member States. We see UNESCO as an organization for cooperation among Member States, supported by the Secretariat. However, in practice, UNESCO has become another name for the Secretariat. Delegations have become “external relations of UNESCO” -- the Secretariat regularly informs them about the Organization’s activities, and the delegations limit themselves to paying for them.

In other words: UNESCO has become an international secretariat supported by Member States, instead of an organization of Member States supported by a secretariat.

Does that matter? Yes! It matters greatly, because dealing effectively with the great challenges of today and tomorrow is far beyond the capabilities of the Secretariat alone.

Take, for example, the projected lack of primary school teachers. It is predicted that in 2015 we will need more than 10 million new teachers to reach the stated goal of universal childhood education. Can the Secretariat solve that problem? Of course not. The Secretariat organizes meetings and writes reports on the subject, but the only ones that have the capability to address this problem are the governments, working in close cooperation with other involved parties.

How can we change this and shift the responsibility for UNESCO back to where it belongs, with the Member States? Allow me to make a few proposals that - at a first glance - might seem radical, but in fact are customary in several other UN organizations.

My first proposal is that the General Conference concentrates on the plans of the Member States for international cooperation.

Why don’t we change the General Conference into a forum to discuss these plans? And then use that occasion to discuss our experiences and ideas? In the debate to follow, I would very much like to hear your thoughts on that.

We could for example use the plenary and the existing five sectoral committees primarily to discuss our cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, and the Administrative Commission to discuss the budget and management of the Secretariat, following the example of the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly of the UN.

My second proposal concerns integrating world conferences into UNESCO’s work.

Here is one clear illustration of the General Conference’s skewed priorities: the results of recently-held major conferences on education, such as the World Conference on Higher Education, are only on the agenda for informational purposes and informal discussion. However, I think that we, the Member States,

should be **deciding** the purpose of, the preparation for and the results of these conferences – not just hearing about them, as is usually the case.

Thirdly, I think the principal task of the Secretariat is to support the work of Member States.

I highly appreciate the work of the Secretariat and I do recognize the important proactive role it plays to stimulate Member States to take action. But this is a intergovernmental organisation so the Member States should not shy away from sitting in the driving seat.

If we leave it to the same staff members to write both the reports and the draft reactions to those reports, we create a bureaucratic merry-go-round with Member States as almost passive observers. It is another sign that the relationship between Member States and Secretariat might have to be readjusted.

Furthermore, I believe better use should be made of the presence of Permanent Representatives. That is my fourth proposal.

Most UNESCO Permanent Representatives have only one chance every two years to exercise their formal role as “owners”. That situation could easily be remedied by regularly convening the General Conference at the level of Permanent Representatives, for example once a month, to discuss one or more specific items.

The last proposal I would like to suggest is that Members of Parliament, representatives from NGOs and youth groups should be more closely involved in our work.

It would be preferable, again looking at the example of the UN General Assembly, to involve them in our work during (and not before) the General Conference convenes.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by saying that UNESCO’s future, and the way we will deal with challenges today and in the coming years, are our responsibility. It is up to us to tackle difficult issues, such as illiteracy, environmental problems and poverty. In order for us to succeed, we need to focus and restructure UNESCO in a way that will allow us to address these issues. If we really want to succeed, we as Member States should not leave it only to the Secretariat, but take the work upon our own shoulders – of course with the help and support of the Secretariat.

I hope my speech has provided some food for thought. I would be honoured and pleased if we could further discuss the ideas I have put forth, not only today, but also in the near future.

Thank you very much.