I. Introduction

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) was founded on the initiative of the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education, set up during World War II. Also, the Charter of the UN contains provisions which designate the founding of an international organization for education and culture (cf. Arts. 13, 55 and 62 UN Charter). On 16 November 1945 representatives of 37 states meeting in London signed UNESCO’s Constitution and Preamble in which the signatories – still under the shock of crimes against humanity committed by Fascism – declared "that since wars began in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. This idealistic idea (reduction of enemy images, positive concept of peace) expresses the hope that education towards an ideal human being will lay the foundations for securing world peace (→ Peace, Peace Concept, Threat to Peace).

The founding members of UNESCO could refer to a number of models. In 1922, the Council of the → League of Nations set up an International Committee of Intellectual Co-operation, composed of 12, later 15 prominent scientists, which served as an advisory body of the Assembly and the Council of the League of Nations without an administrative apparatus of its own. (The Committee worked as advisory organ from 1922 until 1946 when its role was taken over by UNESCO.) In 1925, France, responding to a request by the Assembly of the → League of Nations, after the latter had been unable to secure funding to maintain a significant office in Geneva, created the International Institute for Intellectual Co-operation, a legally independent institution with a secretariat of its own, financed by the French government. The International Committee of Intellectual Co-operation continued to exist as the Institute’s Board of Trustees. From the beginning, conflicts surrounded the creation of UNESCO: Should it be a governmental or a non-governmental organization? (→ NGOs) Should the Organization be concerned solely with education and culture (“UNESCO”) or should it encompass further areas, such as science and communication? Should UNESCO work on the basis of a global scientific humanism, or should it be strictly functional and limited to practical activities accepted by the majority of its members?

II. Purposes and Functions

UNESCO’s Constitution (UNTS Vol. 4, No. 52) entered into force on 4 November 1946; on 14 December 1946, an agreement of 4 June 1946 between UNESCO and the → Economic and Social Council confirming its status as a → specialized agency of the UN (UN Doc. A/77 of 30 October 1946) was approved by the → General Assembly in resolution 50 (I) in accordance with Articles 57 and 63 of the → Charter of the UN.

UNESCO’s purpose is “to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion by the Charter of the United Nations”.

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
To realize this purpose, UNESCO has the following functions, as laid down in its Constitution (Art. 1):
- to advance the “mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples through all means of mass communication, and to that end to recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image”;
- to “give fresh impulse to popular education and to the spread of culture”;
- to “maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge” by recommending international conventions to conserve and protect the world’s inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science, “by encouraging international co-operation in all branches of intellectual activity”, and by “initiating methods of co-operation calculated to give the people of all countries access to the printed and published material produced by any of them”.

The concrete steps to achieve these objectives are laid down in medium-term strategies covering a period of six years (C/4 documents which are conceived as a rolling strategy, allowing for a revision every two years). The 34th General Conference held in October 2007 in Paris adopted the sixth medium-term strategy for 2008-2013 (UNESCO Doc. 34 C/4) and the two-year programme 2008-2009 (UNESCO Doc. 34 C/5) which were discussed by the Executive Board after being drafted by the Secretariat. The Midterm Strategy 34C/4 is structured around five programme-driven objectives for the entire organization which are designed to respond to specific global challenges and represent the core competencies of UNESCO within the → UN system. Those five overarching objectives are divided into 14 strategic programme objectives (cf. section V.). In his introduction, the Director-General claims: “UNESCO’s comparative advantage within the United Nations system is its ability to respond to complex contemporary problems in a comprehensive and relevant manner through intersectoral and interdisciplinary action”. (UNESCO Doc. 34 C/4, 5)

III. Membership

According to UNESCO’s Constitution, membership of the UN (→ Membership and Representation of States) carries with the right to membership of UNESCO. States which are not members of the UN may be admitted to membership upon recommendation of the Executive Board by a two-thirds majority vote of the General Conference. The Federal Republic of Germany is member of UNESCO since 11 July 1951.

Between 1946 and 1956, UNESCO’s membership rose from 28 to 80 and reached 161 in 1984. At the beginning of the 1990s, UNESCO’s membership further increased due to the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the former USSR. As of October 2008, UNESCO has 193 member states and 6 associate members.

During the middle of the 1980s, the United States and United Kingdom left the Organization accusing UNESCO of over-politicizing its work and of poor internal management. Whereas the United Kingdom returned to the Organization in 1997, the United States continued to refuse to re-enter UNESCO until October 2003 (→ UN Policy, USA; → UN Policy, United Kingdom).

IV. Organizational Structure

The organs of UNESCO are: the General Conference, the Executive Board and the Secretariat headed by a Director-General.

The General Conference as UNESCO’s supreme decision-making and supervisory body meets (since 1954) in ordinary session every two years. Voting follows the principle „one state - one vote“, but since 1976 the practice has been to take decisions by consensus. The General Conference also elects the members of the Executive Board, which (since 1995) has 58 members and meets at least twice a year. It functions as a link between the General Conference and the Secretariat. The