



## **UNESCO: Its perspective on cultural diversity and cultural identity.**

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This presentation will address cultural diversity and cultural identity from the perspective of UNESCO and how these relate to globalization (social v. economic considerations)

First, to put subsequent comments in context, I would like to briefly touch on the mandate of UNESCO and that of National Commissions, such as the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

UNESCO is the acronym of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The second part of the C in the acronym is Communications and Information.

The Sciences section is also compound, including both the social sciences and natural sciences.

Education in our context is not curriculum-based. It is concerned about literacy, life-long learning, adult education, basic education, vocational education and higher education.

Natural Sciences: Fresh water, oceans, geology (land-based science); man and the sustainability of humans in the biosphere.

Social Sciences: Women and children, youth, ethics, human rights.

Culture: Heritage and culture, broadly-defined with emphasis on heritage.

Communications and Information: We are concerned about issues of access to information, present-day ethics in politics and elsewhere, freedom of expression around the world and certain restrictions such as hate literature, pornography and the like.

## **The Mandate:**

International Intellectual Co-Operation.

UNESCO positions itself as an "upstream" agency to that end.

Development co-operation.

This mandate emerged in the 1960s with the dissolution of colonial empires.

UNESCO is not a development agency but it facilitates intellectual co-operation.

Ethical action.

This was envisaged from the outset.

Article 1 of the constitution reads:

"universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights & fundamental freedoms without distinction of race, sex, language or religion"

## **NATIONAL COMMISSIONS**

**There are 189 Member States of UNESCO, and each Member State has a National Commission**

It is the only agency in the United Nations system with National Commissions

Their role is promotion of UNESCO in their country

And co-ordination of their country's contribution to UNESCO programs and activities.

The Canadian Commission is a full-service national commission and is considered a large one with a staff of 14. It is an independent division of the Canada Council and funding is done through parliamentary appropriation.

**The staff are not public servants but work closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and Canadian Heritage.**

**The composition comprises professional associations, trade unions, government departments and agencies and individuals**

**Unlike some other countries, the members are not appointed by the government.**

## **GLOBALIZATION**

## **This is not a new concept - it began in earnest with colonial empires**

This was not just resource extraction from colonies, but also imposition of another culture and another way of doing things that may, or may not, have had any compatibility with local circumstances

It should be remembered that it is not always negative - it does provide opportunities such as global cultural exchange (culture as a process) and the opportunity to learn more about another culture, and trade possibilities

**It also poses threats:** commodification; uniformity; loss of identity

**challenges:** reconciliation of the growth of international commerce with the desire of nations to maintain specific characteristics and, especially, their cultural identities

**Considerations : opportunities, threats & challenges** all have social, political, cultural, economic considerations.

Consider **the following aphorism:**

**"Globalization creates consumers, not citizens"**

Faced with the insensitivities created by globalization, a major objective of UNESCO is to "humanize" globalization for developing societies and for as many people as possible;

There is also recognition that globalization means marginalization for many people and, in some cases, economic ruin.

Two slogans being used by UNESCO:

- "Contributing to peace and human development in an era of globalization through education, science, culture and communication"
- "globalization with a human face"

Globalization also coincides with a fundamental transformation to knowledge-based societies (largely driven by ICTs ) where knowledge and information increasingly determine new patterns of growth and wealth creation - this is a major development issue.

This leads to the related problem of digital divide and the information rich and poor, which is a topic unto itself.

Cultural diversity as a social force offers an alternative to globalization as an economic force, at the national, regional and local level, and one means to humanize the process

## **Cultural Diversity:**

What is meant by cultural diversity?

In Canada, it tends to be understood in economic terms (note similarity to globalization), from the perspective of cultural industries, and manifests itself in what can generally be called "Canadian content."

- As a result, it tends by definition to mean "not American"; it is pro-Canadian and sometimes protectionist.
- Internationally, France takes a similar position and has suggested, so far unsuccessfully, that UNESCO declare cultural diversity a fundamental human right.
- Reactions from other countries range from apathetic to outright social and political concerns when it is interpreted from the perspective of minority rights.

Definitions of culture:

- Anthropological definition: "unique way of life of a community or social group"
- Arts or humanist definition: <specific forms of creative expression>, entertainment, transmittal of values such as teaching.
- Economic definition: cultural industries

Definitions of diversity:

- In literature discussing cultural diversity we find a wide variety of concerns - social, political, cultural, economic - again the same concerns that come up in discussions of globalization, and we find cultural modifying an array of interests through expressions such as :

### **Economic**

cultural industries  
cultural exemption  
cultural goods

### **Social and Political**

cultural activity  
cultural practice  
cultural event  
cultural sector  
cultural identity

### **Cultural**

cultural heritage  
cultural expression  
cultural values  
cultural significance

## **How do we make sense of all this?**

### **1. UNESCO's approach**

- First, cultural diversity has been identified as THE priority for UNESCO in the Culture Sector in the next biennium (2002-2003) and 50% of the budget in the Culture Sector is devoted to promoting cultural diversity
- It must be remembered that, until recently, UNESCO's approach to « culture » has largely been what we think of as heritage and its preservation
- Thus, the Culture Sector has led the way in **standard-setting instruments** or conventions that establish international standards for behaviour and the preservation of heritage
- Implicit in this approach is what is explicitly stated in the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* :

"Parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of humankind as a whole" ... and this represents an important philosophical underpinning of UNESCO's approach

The current approach is reflected in **Draft Medium Term Strategy 2002-2007**

## **Three Strategic Objectives -**

### **I. Promoting and Drafting Implementation of Standard-Setting Instruments in the Cultural Field**

#### **a) The World Heritage Convention**

**Involves** 162 States Parties, natural and human-created sites and 13 in Canada, ranging from l'Anse-aux-Meadows (The Newfoundland Norse settlement) to the Rocky Mountains.

#### **b) Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict** (100 States Parties) says cultural property not a legitimate target.

Building, monuments and the like immediately come to mind.

**This is a response to the devastation of the Second World War and a product of the Cold War.**

- Kuwait is an example - destruction of not only objects from the collection but the documentation that is essential to understanding it; think of the example of Bosnia where birth, baptismal and marriage records were created to eliminate the identity of people, same is true of cultural objects.

**c) Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (91 States Parties)**

- Illicit trafficking in this sector is second only in \$ value to trafficking in narcotics.
- There are irreparable losses to cultural identity and distinctive expressions of a culture through illicit trafficking.
- Cultural property is often collected as *objets d'art* with little or no concern over origin or provenance (history of ownership) because to document such objects would be to concede that they had been obtained illegally.

**d) New conventions** are being worked on in intangible heritage (language, folklore, music, dance) and underwater cultural heritage (shipwreck, submerged cities and structures)

This represents a holistic approach to international protection of culture and diversity - heritage buildings, sites, art and artifacts, archival material, as well as languages, customs, dance, music, storytelling

**II. Protecting Cultural Diversity and encouraging pluralism and dialogue among cultures and civilizations**

- Following the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (Stockholm, 1998), UNESCO has actively pursued its efforts to advocate the crucial role of culture and international development strategies, using cultural diversity for sustainable pluralism and human development
- The idea is to channel diversity towards "constructive" pluralism to create harmonious interaction between cultures through equality and inclusiveness, NOT uniformity
- Diversity is an asset, not a liability.
- It recognizes pluralism as the basis of a society and interaction among people based on dialogue, debate, tolerance and mutual respect.
- Protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage is integral to protecting cultural diversity
- This recognizes national, regional, and cultural differences; their similarities and complexities and even their relationship to the environment (traditional knowledge)
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- recognition of diversity requires recognition of the special status of cultural goods and services (cultural industries) - origin of the concept that cultural goods are in a category by themselves and are not mere commodities to be traded.

### **III. Enhancing the linkages between culture and development through capacity-building and sharing of knowledge.**

- There is the crucial role of culture in national and international development strategies.
- There is the question of tourism-related development of cultural heritage - in partnership with the World Tourism Organization- involving sustainable development. There is an irony to this which often leads to destruction of the site. Example: The tourist-attractive sites in Mexico of overwintering Monarch butterflies. Tourism therefore creates new sustainability issues.
- Some tools: capacity-building, public awareness strategies, development of an ethic on conservation.
- There also is promotion of crafts to develop linkage between culture and development.

#### **Can UNESCO Make a Difference?**

**Frederico Mayor - "UNESCO is the yeast, not the bread"** that is, UNESCO has a catalytic role to play

**UNESCO will not do this alone, but will play a leadership role;**

**The fate of cultural diversity in international development will ultimately rest with governments, NGOs and civil society**

- For its part, UNESCO is working through an innovative new partnership, creating a Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity - partnership between the private and public sectors and civil society

Its purpose is to promote and defend cultural diversity, focusing on the development and circulation of cultural goods on a global scale.

- Members of the Alliance will be asked to actively support actions aimed at opening markets for endogenous (originating from within) cultural goods produced in developing countries, investing in start-up industries in developing countries, transferring professional know-how to the cultural industry sector and participating in training activities
- This will result in enhanced political will in favour of cultural diversity and translate the notion of "culture and development" into practical actions based on partnership.
- It will create new markets for artists in developing countries.

- It will lead to North/South transfer of "know-how" and production; technology transfer.
- It will produce global mobilization in favour of cultural diversity, facilitating future trade negotiations in the field of cultural goods and services.