

UNESCO Director General Addresses US Complaints about Organization

Federico Mayor Zaragoza, a Spanish biochemist trained at the University of Madrid, was elected director general of UNESCO in November 1987. He previously served as special adviser to the director general in 1983-84 and as deputy director general in 1978-81. A cofounder of the Center for Molecular Biology at the University of Madrid, one of the most prestigious research organizations in Spain, he received a professorial appointment at the University of Granada in 1963 at the unusually young age of 29. He is the author of *Mañana Siempre es Tarde* (Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1987), "Tomorrow Is Always too Late." Excerpts follow from an interview that was conducted at UNESCO headquarters in Paris on 3 November 1989.



Federico Mayor Zaragoza

PT: I understand that the International Council of Scientific Unions functions at once as an expert advisory body to UNESCO and an outreach arm that enables UNESCO to draw in people and get things going.

Mayor: Exactly. I asked the president of ICSU to address the plenary of the General Conference. He said we must provide to governments elements for decision making based on science. Today there are many heads of state and many governments that have the will to adopt measures that are effective for the future, even if they are expensive or unpopular, but they lack the scientific basis for decision making.

PT: Apart from ICSU, are there other organizations that play a similar role?

Mayor: Yes, there is the International Association of Universities, the International Council of Social Sciences, the International Council of Philosophy and the Humanities.

PT: Tell us about your priorities for UNESCO.

Mayor: Literacy. The 1980s have been a lost decade for the developing countries. Because of the debt burden, there has been a net capital flux from the South to the North, and where there are structural adjustment problems, services suffer. This is economics, this is not my job. But my job is to say clearly that education has been worsening qualitatively and quantitatively in the decade of the 1980s. This is why we have agreed—the World Bank, the UN Development Program, UNICEF and UNESCO—to really try to create public awareness and government concern

and commitment to education for all. We have convened a very big conference for next March in Bangkok, "Education for All: Access to Basic Learning." The world environment is another major concern. I have been asking the other UN organizations—the UN Environmental Program, the Food and Agriculture Organization, ICSU, the World Meteorological Organization, the World Health Organization—to work together on an annual statement on the world environment. This would be a very concise statement addressed to top government decision makers.

PT: What about the United States?

Mayor: The US made a considerable contribution to UNESCO—25% for 40 years—because it wanted to be the main supporter of the one world organization in which scientists and artists, educators and journalists, participate directly. And now of course we miss very much that contribution. But money is not the main thing. Most important is that the leading knowledge-producing nation of the world cannot be absent.

PT: What about the complaints that were made during the Reagan years about UNESCO?

Mayor: Until a few weeks ago there were just the views of the director general, but now that the General Conference is taking place, I can tell you what 156 ministers said. They realize that you cannot change everything in staff policy in 18 or 19 months. But they see many improvements in staff and management policies—decentralization, transparency [or openness], austerity, reduction of volume of publications, reporting to

member states. I have appointed a deputy director general who is a manager, and I have asked Knut Hammar-skjold—a former head of the International Air Transport Association—to chair an international commission, so as to have advice from very distinguished specialists in staff policy. What is more important, this is a very democratic organization now, in which the member states and governing bodies fully exercise their constitutional prerogatives.

PT: What about the complaints about politicization of the organization?

Mayor: We are not a technical organization, frankly. We are asked in our Charter to build peace in the minds of men through education, science, culture and communications. When you are dealing with cultural identities, content of education, communications issues, you are dealing with political issues. And it is for this reason that I always say, This is an intellectual organization. This is the organization of freedom. And therefore I will never try to suppress any kind of debate on these matters. At the same time, we only deal with matters within our competence, and we will not allow our organization to be used for [extraneous] political purposes.

PT: The new information order?

Mayor: This was a profound misunderstanding for which we paid a high price. Sean MacBride [the UN leader and human rights activist] wrote a report to UNESCO, not from UNESCO. This was never the position of the General Conference. The new strategy adopted at this General Conference will be to address disparities in communications resources, consistent with our constitutional mandate to assure the free flow of ideas.

PT: Isn't it possible, even after the reforms you have described, that the Bush Administration and Thatcher government still will not wish to associate with UNESCO simply because it is seen as too intimate with the centrally managed socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Third World?

Mayor: The only thing I can tell you is that I always have been in the struggle for freedom myself, and I consider that there is only one way to freedom, and that is through education. And so even when I go to countries in which there is a completely autocratic system, I know that I am planting the seeds of freedom by promoting education, science, culture and communications.