

UNESCO : interpreter of world's conscience

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PARIS, (By Mail): In the north of Kenya, a team of scientists is fighting to stop grasslands turning into desert. In Thailand, almost 100,000 Cambodian refugee children have gone to school for the first time. In London, the Queen last month opened an exhibition to raise funds to preserve ancient Buddhist cities in Sri Lanka. All over the world, oil drillers consult a unique geological atlas of the planet.

The common strand running through such diverse activities is that they stem from a single organisation which has taken on itself the promotion and management of many of the world's development projects. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has a wider range, and a higher idea of its own scope, than just about any other international body.

A questionnaire sent to its 155 member states for completion by the end of June asked: "What are the main problems which face the world today and which... seem to you likely to have major impact on the future of societies, on the satisfaction of the aspirations and needs of peoples and of individuals, and on the achievement of a 'decent life in the future' and 'further social progress'?"

Many member states evidently had other things on their minds. By the June 30 deadline, only 88 had replied.

The lack of a wider response is unlikely to act as any brake on UNESCO's prescriptions for the future. Neither is the fact that many replies came from industrialised nations anxious to limit UNESCO's growth. Mr Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, the director general, has made it clear he intends to ensure that the weight of replies from advanced nations is suitably discounted, and has told his own secretariat to supply alternative suggestions.

Such methods are typical of the way UNESCO works. A United States Government report on the organisation's current plan concluded that prior consultations "appeared to have little or no effect on the final document". UNESCO has a dynamic of its own, born from a distinct ideological orientation at the centre, the balance of votes among member states and the power of its bureaucracy.

That dynamic promotes a certain view of the world over and above the myriad projects UNESCO pursues. The aim is the creation of new orders in all fields of human life, based on a world community of equal, truly independent nations sheltered from the harmful effects of international economic, social and cultural currents. Inevitably, Western attitudes are either criticised or simply ignored, all the way from Mr M'Bow's dismissal of "centres of economic power" to his warning against "the insufficiently controlled preeminence of the mass communication media".

In one instance, the "new order" view even stretches to concern about the spread of pop music. A suggestion that UNESCO should convene a meeting of all Nobel Prize winners was rejected because there would have been too many Americans and not enough representatives of the developing world.

For an organisation devoted to spreading knowledge, UNESCO is the subject of a large number of misapprehensions. Among the Western public who know what the acronym stands for, the general image is probably one of a neutral disseminator of education.

has links with 456 specialised non-governmental associations.

Mr M'Bow, a Senegalese shepherd's son who has directed the organisation since 1974, takes a broad view of his task, seeing UNESCO as the interpreter of the world's conscience and the embodiment of the hopes of all mankind. Culture, for instance, he defines as "the sum total of a people's creative activities, its methods of production and of appropriation of material assets, its form of organisation, its beliefs and sufferings, its work and leisure, its dreams and success".

That might seem to preempt

undertakings, such as a \$35m (£18m) study of ocean and coastal marine systems and a \$15m programme on mineral and energy resources which produced the world geological atlas among other valuable results. Education accounts for nearly 600 programme items and almost 40 per cent of the operational budget.

The sheer length of UNESCO's project list is misleading in suggesting a behemoth spreading its ideas and operations all over the world.

The gigantism is largely a matter of paper illusion bred from the desire of many member states to get what they can out of the organisation and from the inability, or unwillingness, of the administrative secretariat to set realistic limits to growth.

The gap between the programme and reality becomes apparent as soon as one looks at the money and staff at UNESCO'S disposal. Funds contributed directly by member states for 1981-83 will total \$625,374,000. With the addition of money from international organisations and governments which use UNESCO to execute projects, the three-year total incomes to just over \$1,000m. \$335m a year is not a great deal with which to handle the kind of world problems UNESCO has taken unto itself, particularly when nearly \$100m of that is absorbed by nonoperational items.

The staff to handle all these programmes, and all the administration, is meant to total 3,327 people. In fact, as will be seen, it is somewhat less. More than half the staff do clerical, secretarial and other support jobs. Many impressive-sounding programmes have only one or two experts — "professionals" in UNESCO speak — assigned to them. A single employee may be in charge of several projects, working in a sparsely-furnished, linoleum-floored box of an office which contrasts markedly with the mulled, carpeted abode of top secretariat officials on the fifth floor of the organisation's Left Bank headquarters, directly below Mr M'Bow's spacious duplex apartment looking out towards the Eiffel Tower.

For all the sweeping rhetoric and global planning, UNESCO is kept going by the labours of the people in the small offices and those it sends into the field. In general, they seem to be in better health than the central administrative bureaucracy in Paris and some of the projects they the carrying out show how valuable an organisation UNESCO can be.



Pens, paper and desks: Hope gleams for Cambodian refugee children at school for the first time in Thailand.

science and culture, a somewhat abstruse think-tank which sometimes comes into the news by saving a crumbling monument, getting embroiled in the Arab-Israeli conflict or being involved in the drawn-out debate on international news. In the developing nations, UNESCO is likely to mean something more concrete—projects linked to specific problems such as literacy or the practical application of scientific research.

Both views ignore the true scale of UNESCO's programme. The list of projects and budgets for 1981-83 runs to 2,835 items and fills 659 single-spaced pages. UNESCO

the work of the rest of the organisation. But although it has recently drawn attention through its involvement in the information debate, the Culture and Communication sector is one of UNESCO's smaller departments. Social Science, too, despite encompassing everything from peace, disarmament and human rights to the role of youth, the status of women and help for poor nations negotiating with transnational firms, is another of the smaller sections.

The natural sciences and education constitute the bulk of UNESCO's programmes. For 1981-83, nearly 800 natural science projects are scheduled, grouped mainly into big