

How to Develop the UNESCO the World Needs: The Challenges of Reform

Nicholas Burnett
Results for Development Institute¹

Abstract

The world needs more public goods in education, especially statistics, research and shared experience. UNESCO should be the place to turn for these public goods but its politicization and its limited technical and human resources mean that it cannot at present fulfill that role, a role now partially filled by others, all of whom wish that UNESCO were a stronger institution. Reform is possible, however, as two achievements of the past decade demonstrate (the establishment of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and of the Education for All Global Monitoring Report) but will require tackling several issues simultaneously, many of them more about UNESCO's overall budget and human resources policies and practices than specific to its education sector. Leadership and some transitional finance will be essential for effective reform.

The Need

Suppose you were a minister or senior civil servant responsible for a country's education system. Your country's system is, of course, specific to your country. However, like most countries your country is committed to achieving the education millennium development goals and the Education for All goals. Beyond these relatively limited goals concerned with basic education, you would want to be developing a strategy for your country's future educational development. To meet the goals and to develop a strategy, you would want to know how your country is doing compared to other countries. You would want to know how other countries had tackled and are tackling such issues as the financing of education, the assessment of learning, the balance of the curriculum, the training of teachers, the provision of technical and vocational training and the allocation of limited higher education places. You would probably want to have some fora to discuss issues with colleagues from other countries. And you would want to know that your source of information was objective and unbiased.

If you were the minister from an OECD country, you could turn to OECD for this sort of information, though you would miss the opportunity to learn also from non-OECD countries. Even if you were not from a high income OECD member country, you might turn to OECD – participation in its PISA and other international assessments now includes

¹ Formerly UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, 2007-09.

many middle income countries and many of these are also paying OECD for technical advice and analyses of their education systems. For the great bulk of ministers from non-OECD countries in the south, however, you have no one place to turn. You might be able to get information and help on early grade reading and on randomized trials of education interventions from the World Bank. You might be able to get loans to develop your higher education system from the World Bank and the African, Asian and Inter-American Development Banks. You might be able to get support for early childhood programs and child friendly schools from UNICEF. You might be able to get financial backing for basic education programs from USAID and the UK's DFID. You might be able to get your nationals enrolled in the higher education systems of France, Germany and Japan with financing from those governments. You might be able to get one individual a year trained in educational planning at UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning. You would be invited to several UNESCO education conferences each year.

All this would undoubtedly benefit you but you would be worried. You would not be sure how objective was the advice you were getting and what strings, visible and invisible, were attached to financial support. You would be concerned at the amount of your time you had to spend on international meetings and with the numerous aid and other agencies. You would wish that there was an objective source of knowledge and advice available to you, while still permitting you and your government to make sovereign decisions about your country's education system. You would wish, indeed, that there was a United Nations agency devoted to education.

There is such an agency, of course, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO. But it has two big problems. The first is that it is not able to deliver the statistical, information and advisory services – the public goods in education – that you want because it has very limited financial resources for education and an education staff of very mixed quality. And it has been slowly deteriorating since the 1970s. As a result other agencies have taken on some of the functions that UNESCO should perform, with resulting confusion, inefficiencies and accusations of bias. The second, related problem is that it is not only the United Nations Education Agency but also handles Science, Social Science, Culture and Communications, a huge span of work unmatched by any other UN specialized agency that means that it is very difficult for its governance and management mechanisms to give appropriate attention to education.

The political issue

It is your country's fault that UNESCO does not get better and deliver to you the education services you want. Though UNESCO is one of the five major UN technical agencies, you have allowed it to become heavily politicized compared to FAO, IAEA, ILO, and WHO, politicized though these other specialized agencies themselves are. This politicization takes three principal forms: a focus in UNESCO's Executive Board and General Conference on North-South political issues rather than on the organization's core

functions, an excessive effort by member states to have their nationals lead and be hired by the organization, and a greater interest in the physical location of UNESCO's offices, institutes, staff and affiliates such as schools and UNESCO chairs than in their work and performance. Let us consider each in turn.

Issue politicization. Vast amounts of time are spent by UNESCO's Board, which meets twice a year, and General Conference, which meets every two years, on issues that have little to do with UNESCO and certainly not much to do with education, even though education is the single largest of UNESCO's sectors and even though most member states think that it is right that education be the largest sector. Two particular examples are the Arab-Israeli dispute, which has raised its head in various ways in recent years, including through the issues of Jerusalem's cultural heritage and of holocaust education, both bitterly and endlessly debated. Even within education, much time is spent on irrelevant debates – during the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education, for example, a key topic of discussion was that “higher education is a public good”, a position insisted upon by most Latin American states even though it is evident to anyone knowledgeable about public goods that higher education has elements of both being a public good and being a private good. More broadly, UNESCO, with its one country one vote system, is a forum in which the South can assert itself in ways it cannot in the UN Security Council or in the Bretton Woods institutions. In theory, UNESCO is no more a forum for this than is the UN General Assembly or other UN agencies; in practice, UNESCO's particular set of sectors, especially culture and communications, make it more vulnerable to such political posturing and assertion.

Employment politicization. It is right and proper that member states should want to see their nationals leading and on the staffs of UN and other international organizations. At UNESCO, however, this has gone too far, with enormous pressures to appoint inappropriate staff with inadequate qualifications and, above all, no way to change staff that do not perform well. This starts at the top, of course, with the election rather than the appointment of the Director-General. It is, I think, no accident that both the current and the former Director-General were diplomats – both enormously talented but neither a sectoral expert - prior to their appointment; their country's greatest concern was to secure the position and not necessarily to propose a candidate well-versed in technical knowledge of at least some of UNESCO's key sectors. Deals involving staffing and the location of offices are said to be done as part of the politicking of the election campaigns.

Below the level of the Director-General, there is enormous political pressure from member states and their delegations about employing their nationals. While I was Assistant Director-General for Education from 2007-09, this was by far the most common topic raised by delegation heads in their meetings and phone calls with me. Every short list had to have regional and gender balance, and much time was thus spent interviewing candidates who were barely qualified and who had little chance of succeeding in their employment applications.

There are three other aspects of employment associated with UNESCO that have

received insufficient attention. First, UNESCO is located in Paris, and is the only major UN agency in that city. Other UN agencies are concentrated in such places as New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, meaning that member state delegations typically handle a range of agencies and sometimes also bilateral relations. At UNESCO, by contrast, except for a few high income countries which combine their UNESCO and their OECD representation, most member state delegations are devoted solely to UNESCO, with all the incentives for their delegates to justify their existence (and hence their own employment) through frequent interactions with the secretariat on matters of national interest, above all employment.

Second, as UNESCO's real budget has declined over the years, the share going to salaries has inevitably increased, reducing the funds available for essential non-staff expenditures. It is very difficult to adjust this balance when there is so much pressure from member states to provide employment for their nationals.

Third, within countries, UNESCO has its unique system of national commissions, funded by member states, but usually with several employees per country. An objective of many of the staff members of these commissions is to move to work directly for UNESCO. Again, there is little incentive for them to take a harsh look at the business realities that affect the organization as a whole.

Location politicization. UNESCO has over 50 offices in member states, mainly in developing countries, and the majority have at least one education staff member, by definition too limited a staffing to provide any critical mass of support to the host government. In addition, for education specifically, there are four regional bureaux (Bangkok, Beirut, Dakar and Santiago) and nine centers and Category I institutes² (in Addis Ababa, Bonn, Bucharest, Caracas, Delhi, Geneva, Hamburg, Moscow and Paris). None of these offices or institutes has a sufficient budget to operate effectively, though some institutes, notably IIEP, have managed to attract significant extrabudgetary funding to maintain their programs, even if not in a sustainable way. If UNESCO were a private company, it would close most of these offices and institutes down, consolidating the good programs into the regular program and eliminating those that are mainly symbolic or (again) providing some jobs. But UNESCO is not a private company and cannot adjust to its budgetary realities in a realistic way. Never did this become more apparent than during 2009 with the parallel attempts to close the centre in Bucharest and to open an institute in Delhi. The first failed and the second succeeded, thereby further diluting UNESCO's budget.

CEPES is UNESCO's centre for higher education in central, eastern and southeastern Europe, established in 1972 during the Cold War. After the transition in these former communist countries, it helped them to modernize and adapt their higher education systems. It did an excellent job both during and right after the Cold War but, twenty

² A Category I institute is one that receives direct UNESCO funding. A Category II institute is one that has a UNESCO "seal of approval" but is funded by the country in which it is located.

years after the Berlin Wall had fallen, it had no clear remaining function – its member state universities were well integrated into those of Europe and the centre of gravity of European higher education was now Brussels, not Bucharest. As an economy measure, the secretariat proposed closing CEPES and transferring some of its needed continuing functions to the Paris headquarters. The government of Romania mounted an enormous defense, despite its dire economic circumstances, offering to pay the bulk of the centre's costs so long as it could eventually be considered as a possible Category I institute. UNESCO management, Board and General Conference accepted this, none considering the irrelevance of the centre's substantive work program.

In early 2009, without any advance warning, the Government of India suddenly proposed the establishment of a new Category I Institute, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development. India argued, very legitimately, that the bulk of the UNESCO education institutes were located in Europe and that there should be a higher proportion in developing countries; it also offered to finance the bulk of the Institute's costs in the first few years. UNESCO staff assessed the feasibility of the proposed institute in a highly politicized atmosphere under very hurried conditions but the result was predetermined from the start: the Institute was deemed feasible and its establishment was rushed to the General Conference which approved it without dissent. The longer term implications in terms of budget and program were never discussed.

The technical issues

Thus far, we have established that UNESCO does not respond well to the demands from its education ministry and minister clients but does respond to the broader political demands from its client member states. Indeed the latter is the major explanation of the former. But UNESCO's problems in providing global public goods in education go much further. There is no real agreement on its priorities, its governance is cumbersome and very demanding on the staff, its budget is inadequate, its staff are not all appropriate, and there is not an effective collaboration with its partners/competitors.

Priorities. The different member states do not agree on UNESCO's education priorities beyond a general consensus that Education for All is the most important of all of UNESCO's programs. Given the low total budget (see next section) this means that there is little funding available for other aspects of education. This in turn makes much of UNESCO's work relatively irrelevant outside the low income countries of Africa and South Asia that are still far from achieving the EFA goals. It has also meant that the intellectual leadership on education beyond basic education has slipped away from UNESCO towards particularly OECD and the World Bank.

Even within the agreed priority of Education for All, there is no agreement among member states about what should be the balance between UNESCO's knowledge activities and its direct country programs. While Assistant Director-General in 2009, I drove a successful process to focus resources for the 2010-11 biennium onto four key areas:

teachers, literacy, skills, and planning, all essential for achieving Education for All and all relatively neglected by other agencies such as UNICEF and the World Bank. Another key element of increased focus was to concentrate UNESCO's country support operations particularly on about 20 countries that were far from achieving the Education for All goals. This concentration of resources was necessary in order that UNESCO have some impact, but at the same time it will further weaken UNESCO's knowledge base in other key areas of basic education, such as science education, and its ability to provide advice and assistance to countries that have or will achieve the EFA goals.

Governance. UNESCO's General Conference meets for three weeks every two years, with many ministers attending for at least a week, and its 58-member Executive Board meets twice a year, each time for three weeks. These governance structures are not efficient and encourage long debates and much interference in managerial issues rather than providing the general guidance that is the normal role of governing bodies while leaving implementation to management. In addition, staff reporting requirements are excessive, such that as soon as one Executive Board session has finished, staff have to start preparing reports for the next Board, as these documents have to be translated and delivered many weeks in advance of the meetings. Even with these excessively heavy governance procedures, however, it is not clear why member states need permanent delegations in Paris – their roles are not very clear outside the Board and Conference sessions.

Budget. UNESCO's overall budget for the current 2010-11 biennium is \$653 million, or \$327 million per year³. Yet less than \$20 million per year is available for education activities.

A staggering 45 percent of the total UNESCO budget is spent on administration, leaving only \$359.5 million (55 percent) for programs. Education is the largest sector within this program budget, garnering \$118.5 million, or one third of the program budget. The budget for education is thus \$59 million a year, or only 18 percent of the organization's total budget. To this may be added approximately another \$50 million a year of extrabudgetary contributions, but these contributions cannot be relied upon for the long term and are also earmarked for particular purposes, many of which are not necessarily priorities. By contrast the total annual budget of WHO, in some ways the health equivalent of the UNESCO education sector, is \$4.9 billion, including extrabudgetary funding, or \$2,469 million per year, *over 20 times UNESCO's education budget*⁴. Even allowing for the difference in sectors and in functions, this contrast is striking. Moreover, the WHO budget has increased in real terms in each of the past four bienniums, while that of UNESCO has decreased.

Of UNESCO's \$59 million annual education regular budget, only about \$19 million is available for activities. Staff costs take up \$31 million and transfers to the institutes and

³ UNESCO, Approved Programme and Budget 2010-2011, 35C/5 Approved, 2010.

⁴ WHO, Draft Proposed Programme Budget 2010-2011, RC/2008/2, 2009.

centers, also used essentially for salaries, another \$9 million.

If major donors are asked to increase their contributions to UNESCO's education sector, their usual – and reasonable – response is to point to the low proportion of the total budget that is allocated to education and to suggest that they are reluctant to provide more for education until UNESCO itself does so by allocating funds towards education, especially from administration. Any possible increase in spending on education must therefore start with internal reallocations – in the current biennium, the education sector was the only one to avoid a real budget cut but little was done to reduce the overwhelming spending on administration in general.

Staff. UNESCO has many excellent education staff; it also has too many who are not of the world class caliber that the premier UN organization for education should be able to attract. Its mechanisms to deal with these staff are inadequate – there is no redundancy fund or retraining budget and few efforts are made to dismiss non-performers because of the long time-consuming appeals processes that managers know they will have to face.

Beyond the question of the intellectual quality of the individuals is the issue of their knowledge; most new recruitment in the last decade has been of member state nationals to serve as local staff in their own countries. This has been invaluable for UNESCO's own activities in these countries, providing essential local knowledge and contacts. But it has not at all contributed to the global transfer of knowledge about education that surely should be the major function of UNESCO's education sector. Nor does it permit UNESCO to play the role of lead agency for education in the country as that leadership cannot easily be conducted by nationals of the country – what is needed is experience elsewhere and in dealing with a broad range of actors and agencies.

Place in the Global Education Architecture. As noted, other agencies have taken on some areas that ought properly to be UNESCO's domain, reflecting UNESCO's slow decline. UNESCO does collaborate effectively with some of these other agencies on specific programs, e.g. with the World Bank and with OECD on higher education quality and qualifications. But much of UNESCO's work does not take account of the work of other agencies; this is particularly pronounced at the country level, where UNESCO suffers from not being present in many countries on a permanent basis and, more recently, from an overemphasis on “Delivering as One” within the UN system.

“Delivering as One” makes sense in theory. There are numerous UN agencies with overlapping functions and they should coordinate better to deliver services more effectively. This has led to two major problems in the education sector, however. First, the emphasis within the UN is now on activities and projects, not on the delivery of advice and knowledge, which is and should be UNESCO's priority – so UNESCO does not do well in the competition at country level for UN funding unless it does such things as school construction or direct teacher training, which should not be part of its mandate. Second, the focus on improved collaboration within the UN system diverts UNESCO education staff away from collaboration with other non-UN agencies that may be much more important in terms of external support for the education sector in a particular

country, agencies like multilateral and bilateral donors.

The Way Forward

Given the major problems that UNESCO's education sector faces, it might be thought that reform is impossible. This is not so -- and there are examples of successful reform in specific areas. Take, for instance, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. UNESCO used to have an excellent capacity in its Office of Statistics and that Office's Division on Education Statistics was the source to which everyone went for comparative education data. By the 1990s, however, this capacity had deteriorated very significantly and its data were neither reliable nor produced in a timely manner. A successful campaign was mounted, mainly from outside UNESCO, to re-establish the capacity by setting up an autonomous statistical institute within UNESCO and donors made earmarked extrabudgetary contributions for this purpose. Today the UNESCO Institute for Statistics is again widely respected, although its own budgetary limitations restrict the scope, but not the quality, of its work – and it also has to devote significant resources to statistics in UNESCO's areas of competence other than education.

Another example is the establishment of the Education for All Global Monitoring Report⁵. At the Dakar World Education Forum that adopted the current version of the EFA goals it was agreed that UNESCO would set up a monitoring report. But it did not do so initially and eventually external pressure and finance, principally from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, led to a Report Team being established at UNESCO but which operated independently of the UNESCO Education Sector. It is striking that the two most successful recent global public goods in education that have been associated with UNESCO have both been achieved largely through external pressure and finance and are at least semi-autonomous of UNESCO.

Reform is also possible because there is still enormous good will towards UNESCO. Most developing countries are proud to belong to UNESCO and look to it for guidance, guidance that it is unfortunately frequently unable to provide. UNESCO still has convening power; when it calls a conference, member states participate and very often at the highest, ministerial level. Its multilateral competitors such as the OECD, UNICEF and the World Bank all clearly wish to see a stronger, not a weaker, UNESCO education sector, even if that may reduce their individual standing. Precisely because these competitors exist, however, which they did not during the sector's heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, any reform must involve the global education architecture and cannot be simply to restore the education sector of the past. UNESCO spends too much energy defending its education "mandate" and not sufficient adapting to the reality of the current situation. Similarly most bilaterals wish to see a stronger UNESCO as, with a few

⁵ Before becoming Assistant Director-General for Education, I was the second Director of the Global Monitoring Report.

exceptions such as USAID, they reduce their numbers of specialized education staff.

Seven ingredients are essential for reform: awareness, leadership, governance, finance, employment rules, relevance and a revised global architecture. This may seem an odd mixture of process and content but it is essential that all elements of this package be put in place if reform is to succeed.

Awareness. Neither the members of UNESCO's governing bodies nor its own management and staff are fully aware of the external reality concerning UNESCO's education sector, largely reflecting UNESCO's many purposes, the lack of education expertise among member country delegations, and the lack of sufficient turnover of the staff. These key people simply don't realize how bad the situation is, because they are insufficiently exposed to external reality. Yet officials and ministers in their countries are very aware of the issues but somehow have not effectively communicated them through their delegations. Something needs to be done to wake them up and build a consensus that reform is needed, as happened with statistics a decade ago.

Leadership. It would probably be fair to say that no recent Director-General has tried to reform UNESCO's education sector. Several Assistant Director-Generals have tried, myself included, but we all have come to realize that effective reform means attacking UNESCO-wide issues and cannot simply be carried out within the education sector⁶. Major reforms did occur at UNESCO under the previous Director-General, very much to his credit, but they were more concerned to clean up its finances than to attack fundamental structural issues. For reform to occur, the Director-General must be aware of the need and must lead the process. It is still too early to tell if the current Director-General will do so.

Governance. Reform of the General Conference and of the Executive Board is undoubtedly needed but that is a much bigger subject than reforming UNESCO's education sector. Pending major governance reforms, it would be very useful to establish an Education Advisory Panel, consisting of a small number of ministers and acknowledged experts, all serving as individuals, to help guide the Board and management in reforming the education sector.

Finance. Given the inefficiencies in the overall UNESCO budget, it is not appropriate to suggest that an increase is needed until the present budget is used more effectively. Donors are right to suggest that the budget for education can be increased without increasing the overall budget. The inefficiencies in that budget stem largely from the excessive proportion devoted to administration. This spending on administration, like that on the program sectors, is largely on salaries of administrative staff. If it is ever to be curbed, a one-time injection of finance is surely needed in order to finance the departures of redundant employees. This cannot be done piecemeal but requires the departure of hundreds of staff, who are no longer needed but who are not necessarily poor performers – hence the need for an attractive redundancy package.

⁶ I know this from direct discussions with my three immediate predecessors.

Over the longer term, more funding is undoubtedly needed for UNESCO's education sector but, to repeat, there is no case for this until the present levels of spending are more effectively deployed.

Employment rules. At present, UNESCO staff, like other UN employees, are hired against "posts", established positions with particular responsibilities. This system is extremely inflexible; every job has to be permanently specified and staff cannot be promoted in place but must always apply for a vacant post to move up. Moreover, while nominally on two year appointments, staff in fact are appointed until retirement age. The post system needs to be abolished, replaced with a simple salary budget. Appointments need to be for longer than for two years, to provide reasonable job security, but for much less than life – fixed terms of 5 years are probably appropriate. This is more or less how some non-UN multilateral agencies, like the World Bank, now employ people. Such simple changes mean also major changes to the UN pension system which is not designed for the modern world where staff come and go from organizations.

Relevance. UNESCO must provide the public goods in education that its member states need and want. This means, in addition to statistics, knowledge about education derived from research and from the global sharing of experience. And it means knowledge about the education issues that are relevant to member states, and so cannot be limited to Education for All. It would be useful also to produce a few significant think pieces about the future of education, as was done over a decade ago with the Delors Report, in order to demonstrate UNESCO's intellectual engagement; and to consider more reports like the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, covering other aspects of education with the same quality of analysis. Finally, as an agency that does not itself provide financial but only technical aid, UNESCO could play a more significant role to improve global aid coordination in the education sector – as it has no self-interest, others could well turn to it for help in this area⁷.

Global Architecture. A key determinant of what UNESCO should do is what others do and should do. There is an urgent need to come to an agreement among particularly UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank and UNICEF on who does what, both in terms of knowledge management and also, critically, in terms of country level work. How should high income OECD countries be handled? What is the role of UNESCO country offices in education? How should global education research be funded and managed? My own view is that UNESCO might gain from disengaging from direct country level activities while focusing on global and regional education knowledge generation and management. However, this needs to be discussed and decided among all relevant parties.

Conclusion

Reform of UNESCO's education sector is needed, in order that it can provide the

⁷ This is a separate point from the important one made by Birger Fredriksen in his overview article that an improved supply of public goods in education would also benefit country-specific education aid, because of the synergy between country-specific and global public good functions.

public goods that its member states need and want. This reform will not be easy but it is perfectly possible. The key first step is to reform what is done within the existing budget envelope and to come to agreement with other key agencies on the delineation of responsibilities. Both will build credibility and permit a future expansion in budget and activities. They can only be done, however, by attacking a series of UNESCO-wide issues and so will require active leadership from top UNESCO management in order to re-professionalize many aspects of the sector's work that have become too politicized. It will also require a one-time injection of extra finance in order to finance reforms, especially redundancies and retraining.