

UNESCO Oral Archives Initiative

The purpose of the Oral Archives Initiative is to collect personal accounts on UNESCO's history from persons who have been closely associated with UNESCO activities, either as staff members or in cooperation with the Organization (for example as members of governing bodies, NGOs, National Commissions or in their capacity of national counterparts). A special effort will be made to carry out interviews with persons who have field experience and persons who live outside France.

The conviction that such an initiative is both timely and necessary is the driving force behind this initiative. Timely because it is urgent to interview those UNESCO players who took part in the aspirations and work of the early, pioneer years of the Organization. Necessary for the sake of UNESCO's collective memory (particularly important for new staff members and for the building of a common institutional identity) and for the benefit of historians and other scholars.

"Individuals make a difference", state the authors of "UN Voices", an oral history published in 2005 by the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP). By interviewing witnesses and players, the patchwork that constitutes the history of UNESCO will become more complete, more alive. Individuals made UNESCO what it is today, they "made it happen", obviously in a certain social, political, economic and cultural context, but still leaving marks on the what, how and why things happened. Oral archives can complement written sources by adding insights, information, nuances, colours, ideas and research trails. These interviews can help us better understanding the past.

The Oral Archives initiative is a contribution by the Secretariat to the UNESCO History Project, which aims at encouraging critical reflections on the Organization's past orientations, activities and accomplishments. The international scientific committee for the UNESCO History Project has therefore been invited to make recommendations with regard to the conduct of the initiative.

As part of the first phase of the initiative, at least 60 former staff members and 60 non-staff members will be interviewed. The selection criteria for the persons to be interviewed include urgency, relevance for the history of the Organization and diversity (field of experience, geographical, cultural, gender, types of responsibilities). The selection of names in the list will necessarily be subjective. However, it should be kept in mind that the first 120 persons to be interviewed only represent the beginning of the oral archives activity. The list of potential interviewees will continuously be extended and new proposals of names are most welcome.

The interviews will be conducted by volunteers, who may be staff members, but who could also come from outside. What counts is their motivation, knowledge about the key activities the interviewee has been involved in and, ideally, their capacity of creating a climate of confidence with the interviewee during the

conversation. A one-day information and training session has taken place in June 2006 to launch a pilot phase that will last until May 2007, when a first evaluation will be organized. A distinct interview team will be responsible for each interviewⁱ.

The global idea is, therefore, to combine a pragmatic approach – voluntary interviewers, the use of available resources in the Secretariat and elsewhere – with the best possible methodology and a continued effort to correct imperfections and learn from practical experiences. All interviews will be digitally recorded and indexed. The interview team will be responsible for the drafting of descriptions of the contents of the interview(s) they have prepared and conducted. All results of the interviews, in particular the electronic recordings, content descriptions and, when available, transcriptions, must be deposited with and preserved by the UNESCO Archives.

The main result of the initiative will be a collection of oral archives on UNESCO's history that can be consulted by anyone interested in the Organization and its past. The interviews will be made available to researchers and to the public in conformity with case-by-case agreements with the interviewees. The objective is that these interviews shall feed into historical accounts as a complementary source.

The initiative can only become a success if a significant number of individual staff members and other persons accept to volunteer to prepare, conduct and follow up on the interviews. Therefore, the Director-General has, in a message to all staff, called for volunteers and invited supervisors to facilitate the participation of staff in this activity.

The timeline of the project corresponds to that of the UNESCO History Project, which means that it will continue until 2010, where a synthesis of major results will be presented. If the Director-General so decides, the project may be further extended or could be transformed to become one of the debriefing mechanisms for retiring staff in order to better share experiences and insights between generations, to the benefit of both scholars, the interested public and the Organization.

ⁱ By interview team is understood all the persons who take part in the preparation, conducting and/or follow-up to the interview. The interviewee is therefore not part of the "interview team".