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Educational, Scientific and
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pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
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para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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International Civil Service

The concept of international civil service is not self-evident. It is defined primarily by its adherence to a “sacred duty” to serve societies.

States have as their base a population, comprised of people that stand to receive the services that a government can render, usually by means of a civil service.

In practice, however, the idea of civil service has taken on greater scope. It has expanded in the direction of service to society, which includes everyone and not only those who belong to the community that founded and finances this service. It also means serving the social good, the duties and needs that intrinsically go beyond any contingency or affiliation. These two distinct currents have no reason to coincide, though there is a tendency to confuse them. Neither one is coextensive with the notion of civil service, strictly speaking, and even less with civil servants – most civil services can be performed perfectly well by private sector providers, as a thousand daily examples demonstrate.

Another distortion has led rather predictably to equating “civil service” with “service of a government organization”, which has a different meaning. Civil service literally means service concerning the entire community and deriving from it, in contrast to private concerns. To serve a state organization does not necessarily

confer this quality to the activity of all of the organization’s agents.

In particular, there is no reason to attribute to an international organization’s agents the status of members of a “civil service”, to consider them a fortiori as part of a corps or a profession. These organizations are forms that States take on for their action, at the head of which they agree to appoint a prominent person as director general or secretary general. The latter recruits staff. Thus at UNESCO all the “civil servants” are in fact the staff of the Director-General who recruited them and who can dismiss them, as only he is vested with a mandate by Member States.



More than 2,000 individuals from over 160 countries work for UNESCO.
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Yet the continuity and nature of business make the concept of international civil service understandable. When thousands of people spend long periods of their professional lives as part of one or several international organizations, it is natural that they should consider themselves as part of a community, or even a corps, with characteristics closely resembling those of civil servants.

Besides, the operation and goals of the organizations that employ them tend to reinforce this belief: vast bureaucracies within which definite careers are traced, they all take on goals oriented towards

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UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh (Cambodia)

The UNESCO office in Phnom Penh is responsible for implementing projects related to the Angkor temples, inscribed on the World Heritage List since 1992. The aim is to restore 80 temples with the assistance of several international partners, both private and public. The latter are supported by the International Coordinating Committee on the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor (ICC), for which UNESCO acts as permanent secretariat.

The different staff employed by UNESCO to carry out this major project includes:

- UNESCO staff on fixed-term contracts: two international staff and local staff (support staff, secretaries, or drivers).
- An ALD (Appointment of Limited Duration) or international professional staff with a temporary contract. The ALD runs a training programme at the University of Fine Arts in architecture and archaeology.
- The consultants, with specialized expertise. Some 20 to 50 consultants may work on the site in a year. Some are engineers working on restoring the monument; others are experts carrying out studies to plan out the site for cultural tourism. Missions for technical advisors are short, about one week. Restoration contracts do not exceed 11 months.

promoting the good of society, or serving a certain segment of society, or managing particular state institutions.

Finally, the international nature of these organizations' activities place them generically under the rules of the Vienna Convention designed to protect diplomatic relations and diplomats, which helps to situate the people engaged in such activities in an ensemble that bears all the characteristics of a civil service with international scope.

This shared reality cements the notion, even though interagency mobility is low. It seriously detracts from the idea that a genuine international civil service exists. If this were true, there would be generalized internal mobility.

Without the support of such a possible functional anchorage, the notion of international civil service must from that point on be based on the idea that there is a specific global, international purpose that justifies the special activity of a professional community that is assigned the task of carrying it out. This would be difficult to establish, and even more difficult to maintain, as the number of groups and people that have the vocation or function to deal with international affairs is so much larger than the number of international civil servants. Furthermore, the idea that humanity's shared problems could be

the responsibility of a specialized technocracy inspires dread.

It is more when it comes to practice that the idea of international civil service takes on substance. Indeed, everywhere in the world, many legitimate goals of human endeavour come up against the passivity, frailty or even the opposition of one or more States. It is essential that these objectives continue to be served by a minimal group of competent and dedicated people, in conditions of independence and security that guarantee that their mandate will neither be betrayed nor abandoned. In that sense, societies – and humanity in general – need to be able to rely on the steadfastness, impartiality, loyalty to a “sacred duty” and imperturbability of international civil servants, accountable only to their director general, and he himself responsible to his governing bodies to respect the Constitution to which he has sworn allegiance.

This membership in such an “international” civil service – in terms of goals rather than by definition - confers many more duties than rights. Any associated rights exist only because they facilitate the fulfilment of duty.