



Initial meeting of the open-ended tripartite working group for the follow-up of the review of the cooperation of UNESCO's Secretariat with National Commissions for UNESCO

Friday 19 October 2012, from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., Room XII, UNESCO Headquarters

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Summary of the Meeting

I. Background

1. The initial meeting of the open-ended tripartite working group for the follow-up of the review of the cooperation of UNESCO's Secretariat with National Commissions for UNESCO was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 19 October 2012 in the presence of 146 participants from 99 Member States, including 36 National Commissions and 82 Permanent Delegations as well as several members of the Secretariat.
2. This meeting was organized following the decisions 189 EX/16 and 190 EX/37 of the Executive Board (2012). As decided by the Board, the main task of the open-ended tripartite working group is to follow up on the IOS review on the cooperation of UNESCO's Secretariat with National Commissions for UNESCO (2011).
3. Mr Eric Falt, Assistant Director-General for External Relations and Public Information, represented the Secretariat throughout the discussions. Ms Alissandra Cummins, Chairperson of the Executive Board, also attended the opening and the closing of the meeting (see the List of Participants in Annex I).

II. Opening of the Meeting

4. In his opening remarks, Mr Falt recalled the terms of reference of the working group and stressed that this is the first time a tripartite working group composed of Permanent Delegations, National Commissions, and the Secretariat has been established to formulate recommendations and prepare an action plan for improving this cooperation.
5. H. E. Mr Mohamed Sameh Amr, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of the Arab Republic of Egypt to UNESCO, and Mr Neil Walter, President of the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, were designated as Co-chairs for the meeting. In their introductory remarks, the co-chairs welcomed the high level attendance from all regions which shows the diversity and the dynamism of this network and the interest of Member States in the issues to be discussed. The Co-chairs underlined the importance of the initiative of the open-ended tripartite working group to help UNESCO become a more effective organization and to encourage better use of the network of National Commissions. They reiterated that the aim of the initial meeting was to have a broad and free discussion rather than reaching any decision or recommendation.
6. Participants adopted the agenda of the meeting: it was agreed to organize the work in six (6) discussion sessions, each devoted to one of the recommendations made by IOS in its final report, thus allowing a more focused and detailed discussion; the last part of the day was to discuss and agree on the way forward (see Annex II).
7. Mr Bert Keuppens, Director of the Internal Oversight Service (IOS), introduced the IOS report by explaining that it was an evaluation of cooperation between National Commissions and the Secretariat. This evaluation examined the evolving and expanding role of National Commissions from an advisory and liaison role to governments to one which also includes dissemination of information, programme planning and implementation. He remarked that, as a result of these changes, the role of National Commissions needs today further clarification. Thus, the main focus of the report was to define how UNESCO and National Commissions could better work together towards achieving UNESCO's and Members States' objectives. This evaluation led to six strategic recommendations to improve the network of National Commissions and its cooperation with the Secretariat:

- i. Clarify the role of National Commissions;
- ii. Strengthen the coordination of the network of National Commissions;
- iii. Strengthen National Commissions' partnerships with civil society and the private sector;
- iv. Enhance resource mobilization and be more strategic and focused in the use of limited resources;
- v. Develop a mechanism to manage the knowledge generated by the network of National Commissions; and
- vi. Strengthen the capacity development of National Commissions.

III. Discussion on Recommendation 1: Clarifying the role of the National Commissions

8. Many representatives recalled that the role of National Commissions is clearly indicated in Article VII of UNESCO's Constitution and the Charter of National Commissions for UNESCO adopted by the General Conference at its 20th session in 1978. The current legal framework for the work of National Commissions is still valid. The purpose of this exercise was not to rewrite it, but rather to focus on improving National Commissions' operational capacities by identifying ways and means to reinforce their cooperation with the Secretariat.
9. Other speakers pointed out that National Commissions have a national charter to follow along with Article VII of UNESCO's Constitution. As a result, National Commissions differ according to their respective rules and based on their connection to specific ministries. In this context and given the diversity of National Commissions, participants highlighted that a "one size fits all" approach does not work. Noting the general nature of Article VII of UNESCO's Constitution, some representatives felt that the Charter of National Commissions for UNESCO (1978) could usefully be updated to better reflect National Commissions' expanded role in today's world.
10. Several representatives called upon UNESCO to provide guidance and technical assistance to improve National Commissions' functioning and reinforce their capacities to better deliver UNESCO's programmes at the national level. Financial constraints, different organizational structures and limited resources were identified as critical challenges that prevent some National Commissions from fully executing the mandate of UNESCO in their countries. While some speakers questioned the ability of governments to fund National Commission activities, others insisted that it is the responsibility of national authorities to provide necessary resources to National Commissions. The possibility of involving National Commissions in the monitoring and evaluation of category 2 institutes and centres as well as in the process of UN common country programming whenever possible was mentioned. However, it was clarified that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UNESCO and UNDP only allows members of National Commissions to participate in UN country team meetings in specific instances.
11. Many participants voiced the need for National Commissions to create stronger links with field offices to increase efficiency and raise UNESCO's visibility. Also, greater assistance through North-South and South-South cooperation was requested.
12. Some representatives of National Commissions expressed concern about their limited contact and cooperation with the programme sectors of UNESCO. They complained the lack of knowledge and interest of the Secretariat in activities carried out by or under the coordination of National Commissions, for instance within the framework of the UNESCO Chairs or ASP networks. Similarly, it was regretted that experts from National Commissions are not consulted often enough. The Secretariat was encouraged to ask National Commissions for assistance and draw on their expertise. The ERI Sector was called on to improve its engagement with National Commissions and increase the visibility of National Commissions within the Secretariat.
13. Some participants expressed regret that their authorities were not sufficiently well informed of UNESCO's activities in their countries and first heard about it from the media. More efforts should be made by the Secretariat to inform National Commissions about missions to their countries and by field offices to further strengthen their links with National Commissions. They called upon ERI to encourage National Commissions to work more closely with UNESCO. Some speakers wished to have more links to UNESCO's programme sectors and create an

interactive communication platform for daily sharing information on work plans, monitoring and assessment tools as well as on preparation of the C/5 document.

IV. Discussion on Recommendation 2: Strengthening the coordination of the network of National Commissions

14. Some representatives suggested strengthening cooperation between different National Commissions to promote mutual learning and strengthen capacity building. Others speakers mentioned the possibility of establishing staff exchanges between the National Commission and the Secretariat for a fixed term to gain experience to take back to the home country. Other ways to promote capacity building among National Commissions were illustrated by the efforts of the German National Commission to support National Commissions activities in Africa and of the Korean National Commission to assist Pacific National Commissions.
15. Many participants expressed satisfaction with the work being done in this regard by the Secretariat since the publication of the IOS report, for instance, the ERI monthly letter and the interactive website devoted to Member States and their National Commissions (www.unesco.int).
16. Special emphasis was given to the recent regional consultations with Member States and National Commissions as well as to the organization of information meetings for National Commissions on the occasion of the sessions of the Executive Board.
17. It was proposed that National Commissions make better use of available information resources to strengthen their networking and improve communication, contacts and cooperation. Many speakers emphasized that the sharing of best practices is critical and urged that ICTs be better used to improve the network at the international, sub-regional and regional levels.
18. ADG/ERI reiterated that the strengthening of the National Commissions network would involve the Secretariat only as a facilitator.

V. Discussion on Recommendation 3: Strengthening National Commissions' partnerships with civil society and the private sector

19. It was noted that National Commissions are in a unique position to enhance relationships with civil society and the private sector to achieve UNESCO's goals. Some representatives requested more guidance on developing selection criteria for creating partnerships with private sector to minimize risks, particularly when funding was involved; and others wanted advice on how to connect strategically with civil society and universities to promote UNESCO. In this regard, the Secretariat recalled that the first Comprehensive Partnership Strategy for UNESCO, discussed and welcomed by the Executive Board at its 190th session, could serve as guide for National Commissions in developing interactions with a large variety of partners, including NGOs, Clubs for UNESCO and the private sector.
20. The discussion gave the opportunity for a number of National Commissions to share their experiences and best practices in their respective countries. They reported on local initiatives with civil society to organize events, make known UNESCO activities and involve young people. Some had experience in engaging directly with the private sector while others had looked to the Secretariat for assistance in developing such partnerships.
21. It was suggested that National Commissions should be more open to new approaches and think of ways of working more closely with the private sector, not only for funding help but to raise public awareness levels through such partnership.

VI. Discussion on Recommendation 4: Enhancing resource mobilization and being more strategic and focused in the use of limited resources

22. Many National Commission representatives affirmed the importance of increasing funding levels for their programmes and sought the advice and assistance of well-established National Commissions in this. Additionally, they requested the Secretariat to remind Member States of

their responsibility to provide resources and legal support to National Commission to effectively function in doing their work.

23. Some representatives requested guidelines and criteria for the mobilization of resources, since there are no formal provisions to cover the mobilization of extra-budgetary resources.
24. Others suggested that strategies for mobilizing resources and partnership strategies should be included in staff training provided to National Commissions. Others proposed the circulation of examples of best practice for those who were handicapped by their lack of autonomy. The United Kingdom drew attention to ways in which it had maximized the use of existing resources. Some speakers suggested that the Secretariat could play a role in assisting National Commissions to secure additional human and financial resources. Networking among National Commissions of the Caribbean sub-region, using expertise from experienced National Commissions, was cited as an example of how to help building capacities of other Commissions on the ground.

VII. Discussion on Recommendation 5: Developing a mechanism to manage the knowledge generated by the network of National Commissions

25. A number of participants commented that the issue of knowledge management was closely linked to partnerships, networking and capacity development for National Commissions. Suggested methods to increase knowledge sharing included proposals to foster informal exchanges of ideas in intellectually stimulating meetings, such as the recent meetings held in Switzerland and Austria; participants in these meetings had appreciated this interesting approach to sharing experiences.
26. Some representatives referred to the problem of maintaining institutional memory and replacing and transferring knowledge to new staff. Ways should be found to fill the knowledge gap. Training is no longer sufficient; new ways to collaborate include online bulletin boards and face-to-face meetings as well as staff exchanges and regional programmes.
27. Some consider there is too much information currently being spread around. What is needed is better information more relevant to the needs of the particular National Commission. It was suggested that information be organized by themes and that UNESCO might help with translation. This would facilitate communication among regions and strengthen links within regional networks.

VIII. Discussion on Recommendation 6: Strengthening the overall approach to capacity development of National Commissions

28. Given their limited human resources, not all National Commissions have the capacity to contribute to strengthening the network's capacities. It is important that the more experienced National Commissions share best practices, thus helping others to fulfil their mandate.
29. Most speakers agreed that the capacity to function effectively and efficiently required professional training to achieve the best possible quality results. Related to this issue, the Secretariat recalled that efforts are made to ensure regional training on a two-year basis, targeting especially areas with the most need. Similarly, personalized staff training programmes are organized at UNESCO's Headquarters. Mention was made of staff training in field offices as another way to achieve capacity building.
30. Many speakers noted the difficulty of operating at optimal level when a National Commission faced such problems as vacant posts of Secretary-General, changes of government and, lack of succession planning. It was suggested that guidelines on succession planning be prepared by the Secretariat to help National Commissions experiencing such problems.
31. Some representatives referred to inter-regional collaboration as a way to share good practices and allow opportunities to interface with staff and establish informal networks.

IX. Conclusions of the meeting

32. The Co-Chairs of the meeting summarized the discussions on the 6 recommendations. Mr Amr reiterated the importance of this initial meeting and proposed that the upcoming meeting include a session devoted to success stories highlighting good experiences and best practices of National Commission across different regions. Mr Neil Walter congratulated the representatives for their active participation in the meeting. He identified the issues of increased cooperation among National Commissions, further Secretariat help for smaller National Commissions and private and public sector partnerships for fundraising as possible areas for future attention.
33. Mr Falt credited IOS for providing recommendations which should facilitate the process to develop recommendations and an action plan. He emphasized the open, inclusive and transparent character of the process and the role of the Secretariat as a facilitator.
34. In conclusion, the Chairperson of the Executive Board encouraged participants to continue their work and develop a plan of action to be submitted to the upcoming session of the Executive Board for discussion and reference to the General Conference. She highlighted in particular the need for National Commissions to strengthen partnerships with civil society to achieve their goals.

X. The way forward

35. Participants agreed upon the following:
 - Extend the two co-Chairs' mandate until the end of this exercise (probably until the 37th session of the General Conference);
 - Circulate the summary record of the meeting to all Permanent Delegations and National Commissions;
 - Establish an e-forum open to all Permanent Delegations and National Commissions to collect proposals in the coming weeks;
 - Organize a second meeting of the tripartite working group in mid-January 2013;
 - Develop an action plan for submission to the 191st session of the Executive Board (April 2013), including designating the parties responsible for their implementation;
 - Request the Executive Board to submit this action plan to the 37th session of the General Conference for adoption.

In conclusion, ADG/ERI thanked the United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO for their generous offer to host the forthcoming meeting of the open-ended tripartite working group. He also encouraged other National Commissions interested in hosting the event to submit their proposals as soon as possible. ADG/ERI recalled that the work of the tripartite group will be organized according to the time-frame proposed under section V "Working modalities" of document 190 EX/37; and to develop an action plan to follow-up on the review of the IOS, including detailed timelines and responsibilities for the implementation of the group's recommendations, for consideration by the Executive Board at its 191st session, and to report thereon to the General Conference at its 37th session.