

**International Scientific Committee on the UNESCO History Project**  
**Report of the first meeting** (Friday 30 June 2006)

The meeting took place at UNESCO Headquarters and was attended by all members of the Committee<sup>1</sup> and three of the four official observers<sup>2</sup>.

**Opening**<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, welcomed the members and observers of the Committee. He recalled that this advisory body, composed of eleven recognized specialists from various regions of the world in the field of history of international relations and related disciplines, was established as a follow-up to the international symposium on UNESCO's history organized in November 2005 to mark the 60th anniversary celebrations, to guide and supervise the implementation of the UNESCO History Project (CL/3710) launched in April 2004.

The purpose of this history project is to examine the Organization's place in the sphere of international relations, to initiate a wide range of studies on the action and impact of the Organization, and to encourage a historical reflection on UNESCO's past orientations, activities, accomplishments. In this context, the scientific committee will be called upon to take or encourage all appropriate measures, such as the awarding of study grants or the support to the publication of books, monographs and brochures on the history of UNESCO.

“One of the overarching aims of the UNESCO History Project is to encourage different perceptions of UNESCO's history and to stimulate reflection on how and why the Organization has interacted, over time, with such a variety of different players and partners. Any history of UNESCO will need to draw on diverse sources. It will also need to move beyond the institutional framework, and look at the multiple levels and forms of the Organization's work”, emphasized Mr Matsuura in his opening speech.

Mr Matsuura further expressed the hope that “within the next few years UNESCO will succeed in further developing its work in the historical sciences”. “As I have already said, our success here is integral to UNESCO's overall mission to promote greater inter-cultural exchange and dialogue. To quote the eloquent title of Roger-Pol

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Robert Frank (France), Mr. Ilya V. Gaiduk (Russia), Mr. Mohieddine Hadhri (Tunisia), Mr. Akira Iriye (Japan), Mr. José Paradiso (Argentina), Ms. Emma Rothschild (UK), Mr. Jean-François Sirinelli (France), Ms. Glenda Sluga (Australia), Ms. Romila Thapar (India), Mr. Ibrahima Thioub (Senegal), Mr. Thomas G. Weiss (USA)

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Ali Kazancigil (ISSC), Mr. Georges Kutukdjian (AFUS, History Club), Mr. Luca Scarantino (ICHPS). The fourth official observer, ICSU, had sent apologies. The Secretariat was represented by: Ms. Françoise Rivière, ADG/CLT, Mr. Philippe Ratte, Coordinator of UNESCO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Mr. Jens Boel, Coordinator of the UNESCO History Project

<sup>3</sup> This summary of Mr. Matsuura's opening remarks is a slightly edited version of a “Flash info” disseminated by the Spokesperson of the Director-General immediately after the meeting.

Droit's recent intellectual history of the first sixty years of the Organization: history is about "Humanity in the Making". If the UNESCO History Project can contribute to this process – and help to educate humanity in the principles of tolerance, respect and understanding – then our efforts in pursuit of peace will be significantly advanced. We will not only be facilitating research on UNESCO's history, we will actually be making it", he added.

Mr Matsuura seized this opportunity to inform the members of the Committee of his recent decision to launch a UNESCO Oral Archives Initiative, based on the collection of interviews of former staff and personalities closely associated with UNESCO activities. He also mentioned his decision to make UNESCO's correspondence files available for research after 20 years, instead of 30 years as was the case until now, in order to facilitate the work of researchers and the interested public.

### **Introductory remarks**

Ms Françoise Rivière, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Culture, recalled the main conclusions of the symposium organized in November 2005. The objective of the UNESCO History Project is not to write an official history but rather to encourage the writing of different histories, which could reflect how UNESCO's actions and orientations have been perceived in the various regions of the world and among the different bodies, groups and individuals with whom UNESCO cooperates. One of the starting points for this work is the history symposium; the proceedings will be published soon. The purpose is thus to encourage the writing of multiple and decentralized histories of UNESCO. This Committee will supervise and guide the process up to 2010, which marks the moment where the first results of the project will be presented. At that point in time it will also be decided whether the project shall continue beyond 2010 and in what form.

Ms. Rivière concluded by listing three questions today's meeting would have to address:

- What exactly shall this Committee try to achieve by the year 2010?
- What role should UNESCO play in this context?
- What should be the specific role of this Committee?

### **Election of Chair**

Professor Jean-François Sirinelli was elected the first president of the Committee.

### **Project objectives and the roles of UNESCO and the Committee**

The discussions during the meeting<sup>4</sup> focused on the objectives of the History Project and the working methods. Since this was the very first meeting of the Committee, the purpose was first of all to explore relevant ideas, observations and approaches. The exchanges were rich, which the below summary hopefully reflects.

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<sup>4</sup> The summary proceedings of the meeting constitute an annex to this report.

## **Expected results**

The overarching objective of the project is to “mainstream” UNESCO history as a research topic for historians and other scholars, in other words to integrate research on UNESCO in the mainstream of historical research. In the words of one of the Committee members: By 2010 the Committee should ideally have arrived at making itself irrelevant.

The Committee will not produce one single book presenting a common vision, a publication on UNESCO history written by members of the Committee or commissioned by it. Instead, the Committee will encourage the writing of different and truly transnational histories. These histories should include multiple approaches, non-state actors and the use of many different types of sources, including oral history.

The process towards achieving these objectives may follow different paths. Among those suggested were a collection of essays, the preparation of a handbook or manual on UNESCO’s history and the publication of a series of monographies on themes selected by the Committee.

## **UNESCO’s role**

The Committee notes that the funding of the project must be extra-budgetary, i.e. come from voluntary contributions from countries, foundations, associations or individuals. UNESCO should play a role with regard to advocating and raising support for the project. As a part of this role, the Organization should present project proposals to Member States and other potential donors, as soon as such projects have been clearly defined by the Committee.

The Committee agreed unanimously that one of the first priorities should be to establish lists or overviews of ongoing and accomplished relevant research works available; the first provisional draft will be established by the Secretariat (the UNESCO Archives) and the members and observers should then complement. The idea is that such lists should be continuously updated by the UNESCO Archives, as part of the Organization’s clearinghouse function. In addition to providing information on research, this work would also facilitate contacts and networking among scholars.

UNESCO shall carry out its oral archives initiative (or oral history activity) to the benefit of present and future researchers. This activity shall ideally be carried out in such a way that it may serve as a model for other international organizations, in particular within the UN system.

UNESCO shall as soon as possible publish the proceedings of the international symposium “60 Years of UNESCO’s History” that took place in November 2005 in English and French versions.

## The role of the Committee

The terms of reference of the Committee are identified in the Statutes. It follows that its primary role is to provide intellectual guidance and support to the History Project. More specifically, the role shall consist in mobilising existing or new scientific networks that could possibly contribute to the project. The Committee could agree on the launching of a few selected areas of research that would serve as case studies or pilot projects. A number of specific research topics were proposed, cf. below, p. 8.

All members are invited to send their proposals, which will then be shared between members and observers. The decisions should be taken at the next meeting on the basis of these detailed proposals and working papers. The first two proposals have been submitted by Thomas Weiss on the subject: “Decolonisation and World Heritage: Do Big Ideas Make a Difference in the Field?” and by Mohieddine Hadhri: “UNESCO and the Arab world (both proposals enclosed).

The Committee may also decide to create a “UNESCO History study grant fund”, as suggested by Glenda Sluga (her proposal is also enclosed). The role of the Committee would then be to “act to oversee the selection of eligible students and the awarding of the study grants”.

The Committee members are invited to reflect on and make suggestions with regard to the orientations of research that should be particularly encouraged. Furthermore, the members should use their scientific networks to promote such research projects. The Committee members will contribute to the preparation of working papers on all aspects of the UNESCO History Project, including the issue of funding, partnerships and sponsorships.

## Follow-up actions

The Committee agrees that its support to encourage historical research on UNESCO should not be open-ended, i.e. saying that any research can be funded. We should avoid trying to do too many things at the same time by over-diversifying our efforts. There has to be a focus on specific, selected themes and priorities.

**Therefore, the suggested overall line of action is that the Committee first selects a limited number of pilot projects to be conducted. The members are kindly invited to send proposals, as Tom Weiss and Mohieddine Hadhri have already done, and to comment on each other’s suggestions. The observers are also most welcome to send ideas, proposals and comments. Please send your proposals before 15 January 2007. On the basis of these texts and comments, consolidated proposals will be distributed to all members and observers with a view to arriving at decisions at the next meeting. Subsequently, the selected projects should be labelled “UNESCO History Project” and fundraising attempted.**

The next step would be to encourage research on these selected pilot themes. This should be done through the networks and other available means of contacts to potentially interested students and scholars worldwide. The encouragement could be study grants and UNESCO Chairs, and in addition to the theses and other research

works that should be the result of these efforts, the Committee could plan the publication of a series of monographies. A condition for this would be appropriate quality control through peer reviews; the Committee could decide to limit the number of pilot projects or themes to five and to select a subgroup of three scholars (not necessarily members of the Committee) for each theme. Already now, the Committee members and observers could propose publishers that we should consider to contact, but any formalized contacts will of course have to wait until the pilot themes have been chosen.

## **Summary of ideas and suggestions**

### **The objectives and nature of the project**

The objective of the project is the integration of UNESCO in the mainstream of historiography. The project has to be a model, with regard to its orientations, its methodology and its use of technology. The general idea is to encourage historical research on UNESCO. The project shall explore different historiographic methods and include multiple approaches and sources (croiser des sources), such as oral and written sources and the use of different types of archives. It would also be important to trace non-state actors and the role they've played. Within these reflections, UNESCO could be perceived as three: Inter-State, Secretariat and "other informed parties". From a more process-oriented perspective, the project should include at least three dimensions: Centre, regions and relations between centre and regions. In a broader methodological reflection, which relates to the involvement of individuals and civil society, one should "éviter de voir des organisations comme l'UNESCO comme des espèces de blocs monolithiques".

In particular it would be interesting to explore the role of UNESCO as a "caisse de résonance des idées". The project must be linked to broader projects, such as UNIHP, and to oral history resources, such as the International Oral History Association. A very concrete possibility would be linking to the recently launched idea of developing a Mediterranean history. Among the general challenges would be reformulating the link between past and future and, at a methodological level, avoid extreme relativism ("Il faut de la relativité mais pas de la relativisme »).

The result of this venture should therefore be to arrive at a situation in which "histories of UNESCO" are considered a significant and relevant topic. In the process of getting there, it would be interesting to study how big ideas have been translated and put into practice "on the ground". The Committee could make a special effort to pick up themes where there are counterparts and then confront and combine perspectives – for example, by taking both the perspective of the colonized and the colonizers, looking at such themes as a face-to-face relationship

### **The role of the Committee**

The role of the Committee should be that of "faire faire". Its ultimate goal should be to make itself irrelevant (by achieving the above-mentioned objective of integrating UNESCO's history in the mainstream of historiography). The Committee should

focus on methodology and orientations, rather than on publishing or editing. At the same time it could possibly exercise some kind of quality control on specific activities within the framework of the History Project.

With regard to working methods, each member of the Committee should accept to be the focal point for one or two networks. “Les membres sont demandés d’être le fer de lance qui va monter des réseaux“.

### **Framework and organization**

One of the organizational issues that merit reflection is whether the fact that the secretariat of the project is provided by UNESCO creates an institutional dependence that could represent a constraint for the project. If yes, how should the Committee respond to this situation and what are the consequences with regard to the practical organization of the implementation of the project?

The progress of the project should be subject to a mid-term evaluation, which could be carried out in 2008. Several members stressed that the project could not possibly be accomplished in 2010, but by that year the first results could be presented and appraised. On this basis the future of the project should be decided upon.

It would be helpful to create and use a “label” for the Committee that could be used by members, when they act on its behalf.

The Committee believes that it may be a realistic and helpful approach to launch one or more pilot projects by selecting one or a few themes, then ask for funding and subsequently appraise the provisional outcomes after six months or a year.

### **Key questions**

One of the basic questions and concerns raised by the Committee was the following: “We don’t know what the budget is and where the money is coming from”. Part of the response to this was the idea mentioned above, i.e. the launching of pilot projects for which funding is searched. The uncertainty with regard to the budget remains, but the Committee agrees that the most realistic approach is to define projects and activities first and then ask for the money. In this context ethical concerns with regard to the responsibility of university teachers for the choice of research topics of their student were also raised. How can we possibly encourage students to follow a research road that may turn out to become a dead end in terms of career perspectives?

The fundamental question of what the Committee shall try to achieve by the year 2010 was thoroughly discussed and part of the answer can be found below, p. 7, under the heading “What should be done and by whom?” But the Committee did not arrive at any definitive answer to this question. A number of related questions were asked, such as: Quel est l’objectif final? Quel est le produit final ? Un livre ? Une collection de livres ? Une suite de monographies ? A collection of essays?

Another essential interrogation relates to the danger of dispersion. “Comment éviter la dispersion et les histoires parallèles qui ne se rejoignent pas ?” Although the approach of the project is and should be open and favourable to diversity, the risk is a complete lack of orientation or direction. A balance between the extremes has to be found.

The question on “What should be the specific role of the Committee?” led to reflections on what kind of networks the Committee or its members should create or use for the implementation of the project. Another related issue is how exactly the Committee could possibly exercise peer reviews or quality control? Concern was raised with regard to the risk of putting members in an ambiguous situation due to many, different and possibly conflicting roles, they may be asked to assume.

### **What should be done and by whom?**

Among the clear and unambiguous results of the meeting was that lists of relevant ongoing and accomplished research works are essential. The UNESCO Archives will provide first, provisional lists to be complemented by Committee members and observers. The UNESCO Archives and AFUS should also ensure high standards of the oral archives activity.

Both the Committee members and the UNESCO Archives shall work on the identification of available relevant sources in archives in different countries. This could possibly be done as an update and further development of the “Guide to the archives of intergovernmental organizations”, which was published by UNESCO in 1999. The UNESCO Archives will take the lead in the description and preparation of this specific project.

The Committee members shall identify, create and use relevant networks for the project. The members and/or scholars who are part of their networks could run classes and courses on related issues. The members could also be instrumental in announcing and publicizing the project widely. One of the key challenges is to “élever au fond la valeur d’investissement du sujet UNESCO à la bourse des carrières”. One of the possible ways of action would be the creation of study grants.

The Secretariat shall, when the Committee has agreed on the projects to be advanced, prepare one or more meetings with UNESCO Member States in order to try to get the necessary funding.

Among concrete proposals for the organization of coming activities was the organization of workshops and seminars; an option to be explored is to use the Rockefeller Bellagio centre in Italy for this purpose.

An effort should be made to prepare the creation of UNESCO chairs, as already suggested in the Circular Letter launching the History Project. In addition to the existing UNESCO chairs scheme, the Jean Monnet chairs could also serve as an inspiration.

Although no final decision was taken at this meeting with regard to the precise, expected outcome of the project, several members supported the following ideas: “Il

faut une histoire politique de l'UNESCO ainsi qu'une histoire intellectuelle; il faudrait également un "handbook", un manuel de l'histoire de l'UNESCO, une synthèse". The idea of publishing a collection of monographies was also voiced.

In 2010 the provisional results of the project shall be presented at the congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences scheduled to take place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

### **Themes proposed**

An overarching theme would be to ask the question: "**If UNESCO had not existed at all, would the world be the same?** If not, what difference has UNESCO made to the world? Many more specific themes were suggested during the meeting, including the following:

- UNESCO and History (the story of history consciousness and of the involvement of historians with UNESCO). UNESCO historiography (the development in the ways the various UNESCO histories from the History of Mankind onwards have been approached and written)
- The idea of the future within UNESCO – "l'histoire de la perception du futur"
- The perception of UNESCO among people around the world, the image of the Organization
- The self-perception of UNESCO and the development of this (or these) self-perception(s)
  - Dialogues/conflicts among civilizations – UNESCO's contributions and failures. Tracing the history of these efforts towards "mutual understanding"
  - The development, legitimacy and relevance of the controversial concept of "civilization". How has UNESCO acted and responded?
- Multiplying regional approaches. Example: UNESCO and the Arab world
- Identifying and studying "pivotal moments in the history of UNESCO"
- How has UNESCO challenged conventional views of society and culture and the world we live in?
- How has UNESCO encouraged new ways of thinking?
- Does the notion of heritage actually create or invent tradition?
  - UNESCO and the patterns of decolonisation
  - The role of culture, science, communication and education in endorsing or confronting nationalism
- A political history and an intellectual history

### **Related activities**

One possible concurrent gain from the project could be the reinforcement of training of historians in developing countries.

The Committee expressed its moral support to the idea launched by the International Council on Archives (ICA) to carry out a study of its history on the occasion of its upcoming 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The ICA was created by UNESCO in 1948.



## **The next phase**

Based on this summary of the first meeting of the Committee on 30 June 2006, please find in the following some indications for proposed future action.

By early December 2006 two proposals have been received, one from Thomas Weiss on two possible themes (decolonisation and cultural heritage) and one from Mohieddine Hadhri (UNESCO and the Arab world). Furthermore, Glenda Sluga has sent a proposal on study grants.

You are kindly invited to send your own proposals for one or more pilot projects and/or to comment on the above-mentioned suggestions. The following minimum elements are required for each proposal: Objective, subject, period covered, geographical coverage, types of sources, suggestions for approaches, methodology and working methods, explanation of the significance of the theme, timelines, budget breakdown, possible role of committee members and/or related networks in the realization of the project.

As mentioned above, please send your proposals and comments before 15 January 2006. On the basis of these proposals, working documents for the next meeting will be prepared and disseminated before the end of January 2007.

The UNESCO Archives has prepared a provisional list on accomplished research works on the history of UNESCO (in particular those deposited with the Archives) and another list on research that is in the making. Work is in progress on making available a global database on publications on UNESCO that was discontinued in 1984, but which includes many thousand relevant references. You are invited to add titles to the enclosed lists, which should be seen as a humble beginning; they are obviously very far from complete.

Three books relating to the history of UNESCO have been published by the Organization over the last few weeks: “*60 women contributing to the 60 years of UNESCO*” (French version will be published in early 2007), “*L'UNESCO racontée par ses anciens*” (an English version will be published shortly) and “*60 Years of Science at UNESCO 1945-2005*”. You will receive these publications by mail. The proceedings of the symposium on UNESCO’s history are not yet published, but they will of course also be sent to you as soon as this is the case.

The date of the next meeting will be maintained at 23 February 2006 in order to advance as quickly as possible. The main purpose of this meeting will be to endorse selected pilot projects and activities for which fundraising can subsequently be done.

Jens Boel  
Secretary of the International Scientific Committee  
on the UNESCO History Project