

Crafting the Conditions for Development

An Interview with Irina Bokova, Director-General, UNESCO

EDITORS' NOTE Irina Bokova is a Bulgarian diplomat and politician, who has held her current post since November of 2009. She is the first woman to have been elected head of the Organization. She was also Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador of Bulgaria. Elected as a deputy of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, she participated in the drafting of Bulgaria's new Constitution. She also launched the first seminar of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the European Convention on Human Rights. During the course of her career, she has represented Bulgaria at the United Nations and as Ambassador to France and Monaco. She is also a permanent delegate to UNESCO. Bokova is a graduate of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the University of Maryland (Washington), and the John F. Kennedy School of Government (Harvard University).



Irina Bokova

ORGANIZATION BRIEF UNESCO (www.unesco.org) is the United Nations agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom. Article 1 of its Constitution requires the Organization to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for people of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations. To realize this, the Organization is requested to collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication and to that end recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image.

Would you provide an overview of UNESCO and its key areas of focus?

UNESCO was forged by the conviction that peace needs to be built and sustained in new ways. This idea inspired the drafting of our Constitution, which states that meaningful peace must be founded "upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind". This was true in 1945 and is all the more relevant today, at a time of global change and rising pressures. Challenges pay little heed to borders. People are more connected than ever before, but inequalities and misunderstandings remain deep within and among societies. Human capacity is the ultimate renewable energy, but it faces

obstacles everywhere. UNESCO's role lies in bridging the gaps in global governance by fostering international cooperation in education, the sciences, culture, and communication. UNESCO does not deliver development financial aid, but we craft the conditions for development. The Organization does not itself keep the peace, but works to make it last.

What are some of the major programs that UNESCO leads?

In 2000, all countries agreed on the Millennium Development Goals to be reached by 2015. These embody an essentially humanist ambition to surmount inequality and poverty and to lay the foundations for sustainable development for all. These are tied to the objectives to achieve education for all by 2015 – the international campaign that UNESCO is leading. We have a lot of hard work ahead. Today, some 70 million children who should be in primary school are not. Illiteracy still affects close to 792 million adults – 16 percent of the world population, two thirds of whom are women. We support countries in tackling these challenges.

We work also to safeguard and protect humanity's cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is a source of identity and social strength; it provides vectors of development and growth, and it creates channels for dialogue and tolerance. Humanity's tangible and intangible cultural heritage is protected through six international conventions. This year, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of UNESCO's flagship World Heritage Convention.

UNESCO is the only UN agency with a mandate to promote the free flow of information and stands up for every journalist attacked or killed. We are developing the legal frameworks for free speech in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. We have started work in Tunisia and Egypt to strengthen media freedoms through reform, support to journalism education, and pre-electoral assistance.

Building solidarity between men and women guides UNESCO's activities in the area of sciences. In the social and human sciences, UNESCO is here to ask difficult questions, to explore the ethical implications of developments in biotechnology, for instance. In the natural sciences, UNESCO seeks to harness the progress of science for the good of all. The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission illustrates our work in the crucial area of tsunami early warning.

Two priorities cut across all of these activities – gender equality and Africa. Our convictions are clear and strong. Every child and adult should have the skills and the tools to respond to the challenges of the world today and make the most of the opportunities that are available.

How is UNESCO focused on the impact of globalization and would you provide an overview of your work with United Nations University (UNU)?

All of UNESCO's actions seek to help individuals, societies, and States respond better to the pressures of globalization and make the most of the opportunities it offers. We must take every chance to set the world on the path towards more inclusive and sustainable development. This is the importance of the Rio+20 Conference in June and the stakes of the sustainable development goals we set to follow 2015. For this, we need long-term visions and policies based on scientific expertise. This is where our cooperation with the United Nations University comes into play. We share a vocation to build bridges among academia, policy-makers, civil society, and the private sector. I intend to make the most of our collaboration.

How do you measure the impact of your programs and track results?

Measuring impact is vital for success. UNESCO applies results-based management to ensure effective implementation of its programs through regular monitoring and evidence-based reporting, as well as systematic follow-up to the recommendations of evaluations and audits. To create a more interactive, transparent, and integrated working environment, we have developed an IT management tool to follow and support the implementation of the RBM approach. This provides the Organization with a unique entry point for sharing information on progress against our objectives.

As you look to the future, what are your key priorities for UNESCO to ensure that the organization remains relevant?

I am determined to reform the Organization – to increase its performance and to respond to the needs of our Member States. For this, I am intent on sharpening UNESCO's position on the ground and within the United Nations family. All of my efforts are directed toward reaching the priorities set in the UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy – for Africa and gender equality, and also for the Least Developed Countries, the Small Island Developing States, and Youth. Each of these is vital for taking forward a new vision of development for the 21st century, guided by a new humanism. ●