

Towards a Culture of Peace

Interview of the Director General, UNESCO, Federico Mayor by Mahfuz Anam

Federico Mayor has been at the helm of Unesco now for nearly a decade. Taking over the organisation in 1987 when it was mired in controversy, the Spanish scientist tried to build a new consensus among Unesco Member-States on such issues as human rights, universality of cultures, education for all and press freedom. As we see it, his most celebrated project has been "The Culture of Peace". Through it Dr Mayor wants to replace the existing "culture of war" with a new culture which lays emphasis on harmony against disharmony, highlights the values that bind humanity instead of those that divide, and stress activities that construct rather than those that destroy.

It is with this positive ideology that Mayor has been able to remove nearly all of the controversy that almost engulfed Unesco at one stage, and build a solid consensus of Member-States behind the ideals of this UN body. So far his biggest disappointment has been the failure to bring US back to Unesco, which it left in 1984.

Dr Federico Mayor was recently in Bangladesh on a three-day visit, during which he talked at length with editor Mahfuz Anam on his successes and failures, and about his vision for Unesco in the 21st Century.

Mahfuz Anam (MA), Editor of The Daily Star : What is Unesco's mission right at the moment as different from one decade ago?

Federico Mayor (FM) : It's exactly the same mission as in 1945. We must keep memory of the reason why this United Nations system was founded. It was founded to say that we, the people of the world, have resolved to save the succeeding generations from the scourge of war. And today we must spread this message to the people around the world because even the member-states of the UN sometimes do not realise that this is the mission, to build peace, to avoid conflict, to avoid violence and to avoid war.

We see very often that the UN is a peace-keeping organisation. It is a humanitarian assistance organisation. But we are absolutely wrong, because we have seen the peace-keeping has been a failure. We have been unable to prevent war and now we must intervene. The people have been already fighting against each other and violence has been increased. Prisoners, refugees are the outcome of these conflicts of this century in which we have unfortunately been more impressed by the force and the imposition of pressure than dialogue and understanding.

The mission of Unesco is expressed through education in the sense that education is to provide for each single person. The best thing is to save life because each human being is a wonder — a wonder biologically and socio-culturally. You can imagine that each child has the faculty of creation, of producing a wealth of expression, of discovery, of imagining, of dreaming and this is precisely

what education means. **MA** : After 50 years or so of the existence of Unesco, when you see the rebirth of ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe, the 'centre of civilisation', you have racial elimination like in Burundi and Rwanda, rise of neo-nazism in Europe, you have these conflicts in other parts of the world. Obviously the mission is stronger, but do you feel that Unesco has not succeeded as much as it should have?

FM : In the UN system, we can claim that we have avoided another world war because the foundation was the aftermath of the Second World War. We can say that this is true, that at least a major global conflict has been avoided.

You are very right to point out about Europe. The question arises, how do Europeans try to give lessons of peaceful living together to countries in Africa when they have initiated two world wars in this century? Therefore it is very clear that all these wars, genocides are not the result of freedom. These are the result of so many years under oppression or under colonial rule in which all these people have not learned to live together. They were living in silence and they were living under oppression, but in their hearts, instead of developing appreciation of the other cultures and understanding of the other religions and respect for the other beliefs, they were fermenting all these feelings and sentiments of aggressiveness and of distrust of their neighbours and sometimes of the same people with whom they were living together.

And then there was the rule of one system, the Soviet system, that collapsed in 1989 because though it was based on equality, it had forgotten free-

dom. Now it is the opposite. We must be very careful because we are now based on freedom, but we have forgotten equality. The result can be the same. The disparities are growing. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening.

FM : We must be careful. It is very nice to be based on freedom. This is the first article of Unesco's Constitution. If there is one defender of freedom in the world, it is Unesco. Unesco must guarantee the freedom. We know that if there is no democracy, there is no freedom — full freedom and freedom of expression.

Then there is the issue of human genetics. This is a very delicate issue and we have been dealing with this issue for six years. And at the end, we have produced a declaration on human genetics and this has been approved, also by the United States because I requested that the United States says that it is in favour of the declaration. The Catholic Church has also given its support.

Therefore my answer to your question is, yes. We have set up this international commission for education in the twenty-first century chaired by Mr Jacques Delors, the former President of the European Union. We have set up this commission with the UN on cultural development chaired by the former Secretary-General of the UN Mr Perez de Cuellar. They have produced excellent reports. Our creative diversity is the report on culture. And there is the excellent report on education by Mr Jacques Delors.

And we still have matters. One is higher education which, in my view, is a segment of education that needs in-depth reforms around the world. We must follow Article 26.1 of the Declaration of Human Rights that says that higher education must be based on merit — merit of the students and merit of the professors. I think that this can be a real revolution in the higher education space.

Another matter is science. Science retrospectively and prospectively has very big items for the future. In my view, water is one of these very big problems.

There was the World Higher Education Conference in 1988 and there is to be the World Conference on Science in 1999. And now the remaining thing is a conference on communication and its implications in culture and in human behaviour. This is planned to take place in the year 2001. Therefore I think that, yes, Unesco has been

its support.

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