

Articles

Mexico at UNESCO, from Its Founding to MONDIACULT 2022

México en la Unesco: de su fundación a la celebración de Mondiacult 2022

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Abstract:

This article gives an overview of the history of UNESCO, from its founding and the role played by Mexico at the time to the agency's main achievements, with particular emphasis on the initiatives put forward by Mexico. An account is also given of the work of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to UNESCO in the runup to the 2022 World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development-MONDIACULT.



Resumen:

En este artículo se repasa, brevemente, la historia de la Unesco desde su fundación y el papel que México desempeñó en ese momento, los principales logros alcanzados por la Organización, con especial énfasis en las principales iniciativas que México ha impulsado y se hace una relatoría de los trabajos realizados por la Misión Permanente de México ante la Unesco con miras a la celebración de la Conferencia Mundial sobre Políticas Culturales y Desarrollo Sostenible Mondiacult 2022.



Key Words:

UNESCO, MONDIACULT, Mexico, culture, cooperation, multilateralism.



Palabras clave:

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Introduction

It is with pleasure that I have accepted the invitation of the Instituto Matías Romero to write this paper on the fertile relationship between Mexico and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

I am aware that I do so in times of great tension and in the midst of a serious armed conflict, but it is precisely at difficult moments in time that we must emphasize the value and importance of the United Nations System. Despite their limitations, international institutions are the only means we have of checking the policy of power that constantly threatens our coexistence. It is at crucial moments, between war and peace, that we realize how important it is to strengthen them so they can fulfill their mission to the best of their ability.

This article gives an overview of the history of UNESCO, from its founding and the role played by Mexico at the time to the agency's main achievements, with particular emphasis on the initiatives put forward by our country in recent years. An account is also given of the work of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to UNESCO in the runup to the 2022 World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development-MONDIACULT, which Mexico will be hosting on September 28 to 30.

The birth of UNESCO

The spirit of UNESCO is better understood if we recall that it was created under dramatic circumstances at the end of World War II. As the war was drawing to a close, world leaders, aware that our civilization had come close to self-destructing, convened a conference for the founding of the United Nations, which concluded with the signing of its Charter on June 26, 1945.

A few months later, on November 16, UNESCO was born at a preparatory conference in London, where the representatives of 44 nations had met to discuss the creation of a cooperation agency to foster international understanding through education, science and culture.

Mexican diplomats actively participated in this phase, just as they had months previously at the San Francisco Conference, and it can safely be said that the Constitution of UNESCO reflects our country's principles and values, both in form and substance.

Delegates representing 37 nations signed the UNESCO Constitution, with then Minister of Public Education Jaime Torres Bodet—who would later become the second director-general of UNESCO in December 1948—signing on the behalf of Mexico.

UNESCO, weighing up the results

UNESCO celebrated its 75th anniversary in November 2021. From the outset, skeptics and pragmatists claimed that the mission of UNESCO was utopian and ever since, the agency has weathered storms of confrontation on international waters. Perhaps the best response to the ignorance and lack of understanding surrounding its work is to list its tangible achievements in virtually all its areas of influence. I have provided a brief overview of some of these achievements below.

In the area of *education*, UNESCO focused its initial efforts on the titanic task of rebuilding the educational systems of countries devastated by the war. Later, it turned its attention to strengthening educational systems and teacher training in less developed countries, so as to guarantee quality education for men, women and children impregnated with a universal

spirit. The results have been noteworthy, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while the international education conferences organized by the agency have produced curriculums that promote intercultural dialogue in many parts of the world.

As regards *culture*, the agency has faced the challenge of protecting world heritage, not just from the passage of time and natural disasters, but from destruction as a result of armed conflicts and looting.

The first step toward protecting our cultural heritage came in response to the ravages of World War II. In 1954, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflicts was signed. This was the first international multilateral agreement on this very significant matter. Later, in the 1960s, UNESCO spearheaded a campaign to save valuable archaeological sites, paving the way for the world heritage program for the identification, protection and conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

The protection of world heritage is, indubitably, one of the areas in which UNESCO has achieved the best and most visible results. This can be attributed to the drawing up of a list of cultural and natural world heritage sites in 1972, which created a virtuous circle of interest and obligation: countries that enjoy the prestige of having their main cultural and natural sites recognized by UNESCO are also bound by a clear commitment to protect and conserve them, a commitment that is enforced by means of regular reports that States Parties are required to submit on the conservation measures implemented at listed sites, in compliance with the mandate of the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. There are currently 1154 natural and cultural properties in 167 States Parties on the World Heritage List. In 1970, a Convention to prevent the trafficking of cultural property constituted the first efforts toward combatting one of the most pernicious problems facing our cultural heritage.

These instruments were later joined by the Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage in 2001; the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003; and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2005. Together, these international agreements have raised collective awareness of the importance of protecting the fruits of our civilization for posterity.

The agency has also made some significant achievements in the field of *science*. There can be no denying scientific and technological progress

has translated into tangible benefits for humankind, but it has also led to environmental damage and, in some cases, had adverse social effects. Modern science is a double-edged sword that UNESCO has been wielding for more than half a century to conserve biodiversity, protect our oceans and water resources, and promote protected natural sites in different parts of the world. Unfortunately, the general public is often not informed of the importance of this work.

UNESCO protected sites, which include 714 biosphere reserves, 161 global geoparks and 218 natural world heritage sites, cover more than five percent of the Earth's surface—an area equivalent to the size of China.

In the field of *Social and Human Sciences*, the agency has had to contend with the rapid development of bioethics since the early 1970s, and its direct repercussions on the various spheres of human and animal life, and the environment. New questions and concerns of an ethical nature have arisen and UNESCO has taken the issue very seriously, promoting international reflection on the life sciences and scientific and technological progress, and helping create an international forum where researchers, academics, doctors, legislators and citizens can discuss the challenges and dilemmas associated with the acquisition of new knowledge in certain areas.

These initiatives have resulted in the drawing up of guidelines, namely universal declarations on human rights and their relationship to the human genome, genetic data and bioethics. Far from remaining on paper, these instruments have served as the basis for international and national legislation on these issues that incorporates new social and environmental perspectives.

In terms of *communications and information*, the agency's focus is on promoting freedom of expression and universal access to information, the safety of journalists, and the development of the media.

UNESCO and the COVID-19 pandemic

From the moment the pandemic was declared, UNESCO honored its mandate by becoming involved in the search for solutions to mitigate its impact on education, culture and social life. In March 2020, meetings of education and science ministers from all its member countries were convened and Mexico had a strong presence at these gatherings.

COVID-19 unveiled the chiaroscuro of the human condition: on the one hand, we witnessed the selflessness and commitment of health workers and on the other, we saw the egoism and lack of solidarity of many of the world's wealthier countries that, with a few honorable exceptions, failed to share their vaccines on time.

If the pandemic taught us anything, it is that viruses have no regard for national borders and that wealthy countries cannot exist in isolation from the rest of the international community. Just as it evidenced how interdependent we are, so the health crisis showed how the lack of a coordinated response to problems that are inevitably global affects us all in equal measure.

Mexico's presence at UNESCO

Over the years, Mexico has had a decisive influence on the broadening of the powers of UNESCO regarding the conservation of cultural heritage, and has supported the agency's undertakings in the drawing up of educational and cultural guidelines. This was the spirit of the MONDIACULT World Conference on Cultural Policies of 1982, held in Mexico City to analyze the most pressing cultural issues of the day and tie cultural policies in with development agendas.

The conference also resulted in consensus on important cultural policy guidelines. These are laid out in the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies,¹ which recognizes the equality of all cultures, calls for an equal appreciation of the cultural practices of the past and present, and underlines the importance of passing on traditions to new generations to cultural identity and the participation of both governments and civil society in the design of cultural policies. The concept of *culture*² was redefined, a new definition of *cultural heritage* approved to include intangible heritage, and it was acknowledged that cultural identity and diversity are inseparable.

¹ World Conference on Cultural Policies, *Final Report*, Paris, UNESCO, November 1982, pp. 41-46.

² Definition provided in *ibid.*, p. 41.

Likewise, Mexico has supported the agency in the task of conserving cultural and natural heritage. Evidence of this commitment is the fact that:

- Mexico has 35 cultural, natural and mixed World Heritage Sites.
- We have made preserving our invaluable and fragile intangible cultural heritage a priority, and 11 of our traditions and celebrations have been recognized by UNESCO.
- We have 42 UNESCO-designated biosphere reserves and were one of the first countries in the world to recognize these as tools for environmental protection and sustainable development.
- Mexico has more World Heritage Sites and UNESCO-designated biosphere reserves than any other country on the American continent. We are also ranked second in terms of expressions of intangible cultural heritage.

Mexico recently strengthened its presence within the agency by participating in important initiatives in its various areas of influence.

The battle against racism and racial discrimination is one of the areas in which we have been most active in recent years. It was at the proposal of Mexico that the UNESCO General Conference of 2019 adopted, with broad support, a resolution calling on the agency and its member states to redouble efforts in this area in response to the tragedy of August 3, 2019 in El Paso, Texas, when an extremist murdered 22 people in cold blood, eight of whom were Mexican.

Unfortunately, El Paso was not an isolated incident. Countless race-related hate crimes have occurred since the world over and Mexico has made a concerted effort to keep the spirit of this resolution alive at different UNESCO forums, to ensure it is reflected in the educational systems of its member countries.

International resolutions tend to lose momentum if steps are not taken to enforce them and it is for this reason that we will be hosting the second Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination in November 2022.

Mexico has also played a leading role in the defense of indigenous languages. In February 2019, we hosted the high-level event “Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages,” which was attended by a highly representative number of UNESCO member countries. Intended to encourage

reflection on the preservation of the linguistic diversity of the world's native peoples, the meeting produced strategic recommendations that were set forth in the “Los Pinos Declaration (Chapoltepek)”³ and that inspired the Global Action Plan of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032.

As regards literature and the fostering of a reading culture, Guadalajara was named World Book Capital 2022—a well-deserved recognition that highlights just how influential the capital of Jalisco is in the country's cultural life.⁴

Combatting the trafficking of cultural property has also been a priority. In 2021, the incidence of illicit transactions increased significantly, due to online sales and the COVID-19 pandemic, which complicated maintenance and surveillance, making it easier for criminals to plunder cultural sites.

Mexico has insisted on the need to strengthen the actions of international institutions and cooperation, which will require stricter enforcement of the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. As we all know, while it has the best of intentions, this convention nonetheless has clear limitations, not least the resistance with which it has been met by vested interests in the art world, operating under the legal protection of countries that engage in lucrative transactions on this market.

As part of our search for new ways of overcoming this resistance, we are currently working on an aggressive strategy to raise public awareness as to the negative impact of trafficking in cultural property, the initial fruits of which include the recent return of major works deemed world heritage.

With the support of the UNESCO Secretariat, we plan to launch a communications campaign combining educational actions and meetings of experts for the sharing of information and better practices.

³ High-Level Event, Making a Decade of Action for Indigenous Languages, “Los Pinos Declaration (Chapoltepek),” at https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/los_pinos_declaration_170720_en.pdf (date of access: June 16, 2022).

⁴ UNESCO, “Guadalajara Named World Book Capital 2022,” press release, November 4, 2020, at <https://en.unesco.org/news/guadalajara-named-world-book-capital-2022> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

The repositioning of Mexico within UNESCO

Mexico ended 2021 on a successful note with its election to the UNESCO Executive Board and World Heritage Committee for the next four years.

Along with the General Conference, the Executive Board is UNESCO's main governing body, responsible for approving the agency's program of action and budget, among other important matters. The World Heritage Committee is the body that oversees all issues related to the protection and conservation of cultural and natural sites of exceptional universal value. At both elections, Mexico received the most votes from Latin America and the Caribbean, evidencing the clout and presence it currently enjoys within UNESCO.

Clearly a lot remains to be done in all the areas I have mentioned. The agency faces an uphill slog, oftentimes against the tide of powerful economic trends, national egoisms, and the aspirations to power that are so characteristic of our modern world.

In this testing environment, UNESCO is a bastion of cooperation between countries and an exemplary one at that, due to the loftiness of its mission and its untiring work to foster dialogue among cultures. In short, it would be no exaggeration to say that it shines a light of hope on the outlook for the international community.

Work of the permanent mission of Mexico in the runup to the MONDIACULT 2022⁵

I would like to round off with a look at the work of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to UNESCO in the months leading up to the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development MONDIACULT 2022, which will be held in Mexico City on September 28 to 30.

It was during the General Conference of 2019 in Paris, at the Forum of Ministers of Culture, that Mexico proposed a meeting of the culture

⁵ Coauthored with Gustavo Morales Cirón, head of the Culture Sector of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to UNESCO.

ministers of UNESCO member countries to reflect on the challenges of our day, an initiative that was embraced by forum participants and UNESCO authorities alike.⁶

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Permanent Mission of Mexico worked ceaselessly to achieve consensus among UNESCO member countries, with a view to getting MONDIACULT 2022 approved at the 41st session of the General Conference in November 2021 as an inter-governmental conference⁷ that would be hosted by Mexico and attended by ministers.

Prior to this, several decisions had to be adopted by all 193 member states at the autumn 2020 and 2021 sessions of the UNESCO Executive Board. It was during these sessions that the initial procedural steps were taken. The first of these was a formal request that the director-general convene the meeting and the ratification of Mexico as the proponent State to host it. The title of the conference was also approved, its mandate validated and Mexico City confirmed as the venue, while regional consultations were organized to identify its main themes. At every stage in the process, Mexico received the unanimous backing of UNESCO member countries, which was no mean feat given that consensus is not readily given in an agency with such diverse membership.

It has been decades since a high-level meeting on culture has been held and there is perhaps no better time than the present for the international community to redefine the content and direction of cultural policies in the face of new challenges and old ones that have yet to be addressed.

MONDIACULT 2022 will be an invaluable opportunity to promote dialogue between States, inter-governmental organizations, NGOs, cultural institutions, experts, cultural figures, and other actors linked to culture and development problems, so as to guarantee broad participation in debate on the issues at hand.

⁶ UNESCO, “120 Ministers Gathered at UNESCO Call for Stronger Cultural Policies for more Sustainable Societies,” November 19, 2019, at <https://en.unesco.org/news/120-ministers-gathered-unesco-call-stronger-cultural-policies-more-sustainable-societies> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

⁷ UNESCO General Conference, “Regulations for the General Classification of the Various Categories of Meetings Convened by UNESCO,” art. 5, in *Basic Texts: 2022 edition*, Geneva, UNESCO, 2022, p. 119, at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380873> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

To define the priorities of the conference's agenda, UNESCO member countries embarked on a preparatory process that included five regional consultations between December 2021 and February 2022, headed by Croatia for Europe and North America; Mexico for Latin America and the Caribbean; Indonesia for Asia-Pacific; Senegal for Africa; and Saudi Arabia for the Arab States.

Four main themes were identified as a result of these consultations: the strengthening of cultural governance with a view to establishing a resilient, inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem; the cross-cutting role of culture in sustainable development; the promotion and protection of cultural heritage as a vehicle for social inclusion, belonging and peace; and the promotion of the creative economy through education and the creation of jobs and opportunities.⁸ These themes were submitted to the UNESCO Executive Board at its April 2022 session, during which it was decided, at the proposal of Mexico, that MONDIACULT 2022 will end with a final declaration.⁹

The decision to make a final declaration that condenses the work of the conference is of the utmost importance, as this will help ensure it has an impact on cultural policies in the immediate future and into the long term.

The guidelines that are to be included in the final declaration are based on the four themes identified during the regional consultations and address the recovery of the cultural sector in the aftermath of COVID-19, the effects of the digital transformation, the promotion of collective rights, the reappraisal of culture as a public good, culture as a means of addressing global challenges such as climate change, inequalities and educational problems, the strengthening of international cooperation, the combatting of trafficking in cultural property, the contribution of cultural heritage to social cohesion

⁸ UNESCO Executive Board, "UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development—Mondiacult 2022", at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380779> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

⁹ Decision adopted at the 214th session of the UNESCO Executive Board. See UNESCO Executive Board, "UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development—MONDIACULT 2022," Decisions adopted by the Executive Board at its 214th session, 214 EX/ Decisiones, May 13, 2022, p. 11, at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381300> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

during crises and natural disasters, and an improvement in the living conditions of creators and those engaged in the cultural industries.

To shore up the participative, inclusive nature of the conference, all member countries have been assured that their positions will be taken into consideration in the final declaration. This, however, has necessitated another series of regional consultations headed by representatives appointed by each of the UNESCO electoral groups. These were the same countries that headed the regional consultations to define the themes of MONDIACULT, in addition to the United Kingdom for the coordination of North America and Western Europe. On this occasion, Croatia only coordinated the Eastern European bloc.

At the same time, a working group comprised of countries selected by each of the agency's electoral groups was set up to coordinate MONDIACULT 2022. This group will be presided over by Mexico in its capacity as host country.

The process began with a zero draft of the declaration based on the themes defined during the regional consultations, which was then submitted for review to member countries. Once again, Mexico was charged with coordinating the participation of the 36 GRULAC countries (Group of Latin American and Caribbean countries), and gathering their comments and recommendations.

The final MONDIACULT 2022 declaration will provide a much-needed framework for UNESCO and its member states in the design of cultural and sustainable development policies.

In her message on the occasion of World Art Day¹⁰ on April 15, 2022, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay underlined the importance of MONDIACULT 2022, not just in UNESCO spheres, but to the international community:

The challenges we face today can only be met through far-reaching cultural policies aimed at helping creative communities overcome this crisis and protecting and improving the status of artists. The UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable

¹⁰ UNESCO, "World Art Day: April 15," at <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/art-day> (date of access: June 16, 2022).

Development–MONDIACULT 2022 will bring together the world’s culture ministers 40 years after the first MONDIACULT in 1982. It will ensure that the voices of artists and civil society are fully heard as countries set the agenda for culture for the years to come.¹¹

In these difficult times, MONDIACULT 2022 is at once a unique opportunity for the international community and all the actors and beneficiaries of culture, and a clear reminder of Mexico’s commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism.

¹¹ Audrey Azoulay, “Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the World Art Day”, DG/ME/ID/2022/63, April 15, 2022, at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381143> (date of access: June 16, 2022).