HOW TO MAKE UNESCO MORE VISIBLE IN MEMBER STATES?

The role of National Commissions

Electronic Debate

hosted at the

Meeting Place for National Commissions and New Partnerships

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Division of Relations with National Commissions and New Partnerships

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Summary of the Debate

This debate took place at the Meeting Place for National Commissions and New Partnerships, which is the electronic forum of the Division of Relations with National Commissions and New Partnerships, accessible through the website www.unesco.org.

The debate was led by the Chairperson of the Swedish National Commission, Mr. Nils Gunnar Nilsson, to whom we are grateful for his lively chairmanship.

The aim of debating this subject was to share experiences and initiatives of National Commissions in raising the visibility of UNESCO in its Member States, keeping in mind the intention of portraying the concrete actions of the Organisation rather than making institutional advertising. UNESCO is sharpening and implementing a new Information and Communication Strategy, where National Commissions are an essential link as key relays for information all over the world.

Participating in the debate were the opinion that National Commissions should try to keep up with the pace of development of the World Wide Web and the communication and information technologies, and use them more effectively.

Allocating funds to adequately equip National Commissions, for example, has been a growing feature of the Participation Programme requests received by UNESCO Headquarters.

Some National Commissions, such as New Zealand's, have included a communication strategy in their plans, that is to say that a budget allocation for this purpose has already been earmarked.

Rwanda's National Commission has even suggested that, due to the importance of the matter, Programme Participation funds and extra-budgetary ones should be reserved for communication and media productions. This way, monthly radio and TV programmes could be prepared.

National Commissions having a minimum of budget allocation are able to hire media consultants or young journalists, usually part-time, who lend a hand to draft press releases, prepare newsletters and develop close contacts with national journalists.

However, most National Commissions lack funds for communication and information and are far from being able to hire extra personnel to help with these matters. Are there any possibilities of well reaching the public with news about UNESCO in this case?

A firm "Yes" came out from the electronic debate and many replicable experiences were put forward.
United Kingdom’s National Commission stressed the need to rely on one’s own wit and ability as the main condition of success.

First and foremost there seems to be two major challenges: timing and newsworthiness. There are many national actors competing for space and coverage in the media and, even if the National Commission has a "good story", it may be left aside for other news. Taking this fact into account, every effort should be made to develop recognition and access to the media by always ensuring rich and relevant content. Well placed articles in the morning papers are very likely to be picked up by the TV news or radio stations. Though hard to accept, it is worth remembering that in this field the rules are set by the media, not by UNESCO’s machinery.

Beginning by creating a website or producing a bulletin was felt important, since it allows to reach out a world-wide audience with information on the National Commissions as well as to link to other partners sharing common interests.

It was stressed that it is vital to know the right media channels and names of interested journalists, and to be capable of recognising which newspapers, magazines, specialised press (e.g. teachers' magazines) or radio broadcasts could show interest in UNESCO-related issues. Participants said that there is no need to be a media specialist to have these skills. It all comes to a matter of "putting on another set of glasses" and combining an external look at UNESCO with the already acquired inside knowledge of National Commissions. Furthermore, it was suggested that UNESCO’s Bureau for Public Information could give National Commissions the contact names of national journalists. For the media strategy to succeed, National Commissions ought to have a full directory of contacts, which should include focal points in the media, in the ministries, at selected non-governmental organisations, etc.

Organising attractive events that had the potential of being relayed by the media was also found to be a prerequisite to obtain coverage. The local and regional media may be targeted to report on events such as youth gatherings, lectures or the very many UNESCO “days”.

For a better spin-off effect, National Commissions could associate themselves with reputed partners like national institutions, non-governmental organisations or certain enterprises from the business sector. Sponsorship was also brought up at the electronic debate as a good way of making UNESCO’s name visible.

Another useful advice given was to profit from UNESCO’s press releases to keep the journalist core informed in each country. Also articles from “Sources”, “The Courier” or UNESCO bulletins could be used, even if in some countries this initiative requires translation into a national language.

Training on communication and media issues was emphasised. The Division of Relations with National Commissions and New Partnerships is already organising a series of training workshops on this matter for this biennium. For information on the training programme, please contact ml.kearney@unesco.org or m.lourenco@unesco.org
NEXT DEBATE

**Starting date:** 1 September 2002

**Topic:** The National Commissions and UNESCO’s Regional Strategies

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