



50 years devoted to the preservation of the heritage and to the cultural development of Latin America and the Caribbean: evidences of the contribution of a social sciences library to that purpose

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Abstract:

It is evident that libraries help to maintain the bond between the past and the future, and that the foundation of our civilization and of human activities can be found in libraries. In consonance with the theme of this Congress we have undertaken to prove, through a case study of UNESCO's Regional Center in Havana, Cuba, that social sciences libraries contribute to attaining this goal, through the conservation and dissemination of publications in the fields of education, science, culture, communications and information. Social science libraries also use information to support actions that preserve the heritage of peoples and cultural development. They also enable research projects in the fields of social sciences through the collection and processing of the results in support of current and future actions. They provide equitable access to these resources for all, thereby contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of peoples through the culture and knowledge they transmit, enabling them to shape the future on the basis of the resources inherited from the past.

"A Nation Remains Alive, for as long as its culture is alive". This sign appeared at the entrance of the Kabul Museum devastated by more than 20 years of war. It is a symbolic gesture that we bring here because it confers a profound sense to the theme of this IFLA Congress.

On the threshold of the XXI Century, nobody doubts that culture is essential for the development of peoples. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was born on November 16th 1945, as a United Nations

agency specializing in intellectual cooperation and the promotion of peace through education and culture. Throughout more than 60 years of existence it has endeavoured to contribute to international peace and prosperity for all mankind, fostering cooperation among nations in these fields and carrying out an important work of reflection which has helped to bring to light the bond of people's development with their culture.

UNESCO'S action, aimed at the execution of great projects related to the preservation of the heritage of historical and monumental and natural centers and sites, has promoted and supported studies on identity, multiculturalism, and intercultural dialogue, among many other subjects, showing that the economic variables are not the only ones that determine and favor the development of peoples, if the aim is to achieve a genuine, lasting, just and equitable human development.

Comparative studies on contemporary development provide clear evidence that development is not just the result of economic processes. The notion of "heritage" has continued to evolve and expand throughout the years. Today we talk of natural and cultural, tangible and intangible heritage, and it increasingly incorporates new elements not previously regarded as such nor given the same emphasis, such as languages and oral traditions, expressions of popular and traditional cultures. These new elements include know-how, craftsmanship, industrial heritage, as well as natural heritage sites, landscapes and biological diversity. When we talk of customs, beliefs and traditions, we are talking of the culture of human beings and therefore social aspects. We are talking of their immaterial cultural heritage, many of them of a universal value from historical artistic, ethnological sociological, anthropological, linguistic or literary points of view, acknowledged by UNESCO since 2001.

This heritage, the value of which spreads beyond national borders, is common to all humanity because of its social content and spiritual value. The content of the experiences that accumulate continuously during generations and centuries must be preserved since it is essentially a non-renewable, very fragile resource. It is necessary to enrich and to transmit this heritage, since it is a fundamental element of the peoples' identity and cohesion. It is a source of inspiration and creativity, and constitutes, therefore, an indispensable resource both for human development and for the future of all peoples'.

The conclusions of the "World Committee of Culture and Development"¹ reflect these concepts as well. After three years of meetings in different parts of the World, the Committee collected information and published it in the report: "Our Creative Diversity" (better known perhaps as the Pérez de Cuéllar report), and the documents of the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (Stockholm, 1998). This work brought to the fore and reaffirmed the need for development processes to rest upon the diversity of societies: considering heritage, identity and creativity as elements intrinsically integrated to this process, and highlighting the role of heritage in development and the necessary social cohesion around it, through its preservation and just assessment, which is contained in the theme of this Congress.

¹ A Group created 1992 by the UN Secretary General and UNESCO Director General, under the chairmanship of Dr. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, whose members are specialists on social and human sciences, coming from all continents.

“LIBRARIES CREATE FUTURES: BUILDING ON CULTURAL HERITAGE”.

It is quite evident that libraries help to maintain the bond between the past and the future, and that the foundation of our civilization and of man's activities can be found in libraries. In consonance with the theme of this Congress we have undertaken to prove, through a case study, that social sciences libraries contribute to attaining this goal, through the conservation and dissemination of publications in the fields of education, science, culture, communications and information. Social science libraries also use information to support actions that preserve the heritage of peoples and cultural development. They also enable research projects in the fields of social sciences through the collection and processing of the results in support of current and future actions. They provide equitable access to these resources for all, thereby contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of peoples through the culture and knowledge they transmit, enabling them to shape the future on the basis of the resources inherited from the past.

We have already mentioned that since its inception in 1945, UNESCO has been promoting the preservation of the cultural inheritance in a broad universal sense, and for more than 50 years it has been doing this, in particular, for Latin American and the Caribbean. One of the first projects was a Regional Center set up in Havana, in 1950, to cover, at the beginning, its actions in the whole Western Hemisphere, in the fields of education, science and culture. This was later extended to information and communications, and since 1972 as the Regional Office of Culture for Latin America and the Caribbean.

With the support of the Regional Office of Culture, work has been done at the crossroads of culture and development. By means of very concrete projects, art, creativity, and cultural heritage have been seen as related to economic factors and have been favored for models of sustainable development. UNESCO implements its programs in close coordination and cooperation with UNESCO'S National Commissions, the relevant governmental agencies, as well as with many regional, national, local and non-governmental institutions. This enables the Office to make a contribution to the consolidation of peace, the decrease of poverty, and to sustainable development and international dialogue.

In this context, involving UNESCO'S interest in bringing its action closer to the field and the interest of the governments of the regions is increasing their cooperative relationships with the Organization, particularly in the cultural field where many activities have been conducted. The Havana Office acts as a genuine link for practical cooperation between the countries of the Region and the Headquarter's Cultural Sector. A large amount of fruitful work is carried out, contributing to the design and implementation of projects, the enactment of laws and the adoption of norms, the training of specialists, and the organization of congresses and meetings with the participation of the most outstanding specialists and thinkers of the Region.

One of the first projects implemented by UNESCO'S Havana Cultural Office, starting in 1972, was the precise elaboration of a Program of Studies of the Cultures of Latin American and the Caribbean, which produced a number of books including *Latin America in its Culture*, to which I will refer later on in detail. (See ANNEXE 1.)

DOCUMENTATION CENTER

In February 1959, in considering the progress made and the importance that UNESCO attached first to information and knowledge, then to documentary and audiovisual supports, the Cuban Government and UNESCO agreed to establish a Documentation Center in the then Regional Center in Havana. Named after the outstanding Mexican intellectual, Jaime Torres Bodet, a former Director General of UNESCO, it first specialized in pedagogical subjects and afterwards its speciality was extended to the field of culture. At the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in 1982, and in consonance with the new functions of the Havana Office in its Recommendation No. 51, the following objectives for the Documentation Center were ratified: *“To organize and disseminate information on Latin American and Caribbean Cultures, and to support the work of the Office”* on which it depends organically and functionally as well as where it is located.

From the start, the establishment and development of the Documentation Center has depended upon Cuba's support and backing. In fulfilling the aforesaid recommendation, it has not ceased to collect, organize and disseminate information about Latin American and Caribbean Cultures, and implement the recommendations as well. It can be affirmed that the Center has not failed to support to the fecund work of the Office in the Region. During the past 50 years, the authors have worked at the Documentation Center at different times, allowing them to attest to these facts.

One of the first Centers founded by UNESCO and, considered the “dean” in Latin America having been established on February 2, 1959, the Center became a custodian of the documents published by UNESCO in its different spheres of action, covering diverse fields of social sciences. Many of its collections of monographic publications and periodicals are unique in the Region. They constitute a part of the collective memory of the Organization and contain the thought that has prevailed in the diverse spheres of competence of UNESCO throughout the years and therefore are exceptionally valuable. This Collection has a double function: while supporting UNESCO'S multidisciplinary actions in favor of development in Latin America and the Caribbean, it constitutes and preserves an institutional heritage, which is both regional and universal.

Taking into account UNESCO'S Recommendations concerning the protection of cultural heritage

Cuba's National Heritage Center, issued Resolution Nro.15/04 2004. This resolution, signed by the then President of the National Heritage Council, Dr. Marta Arjona, declared the Cultural Heritage of the Cuban Nation, the valuable collections of documents of UNESCO, covering the first years of the creation of the organization up to now that are in the possession of the Documentation Center, after they were examined by its specialists who ascertained the value of those exceptional collections of unique documents. This is particularly pertinent to the “Recommendation for Protection of Movable Cultural Property, adopted by the 20th General Conference, in Paris on November 28, 1978 which states:

"Movable cultural properties all properties that are the expression or testimony of both human creation or nature's evolution and that have an archaeological, historical, artistic, scientific or technical value, in particular those corresponding to the following categories: manuscripts and incunables, Indexes, books, documents or publication of special interest."

A fundamental part of the functions of the Center is to support the work of the Regional Office, supplying the information contained in its data bases and documents collections to the program specialist, specialists and general public in Cuba and in the whole Region. Since the eighties it has performed several tasks which have contributed, among other things, to the creation and development of the recently revitalized System of Cultural Information for Latin America and the Caribbean (SICALC), of several information systems in the Region, and a thesaurus specializing in cultural, heritage and regional subjects, such as the Spanish language version of the International Thesaurus of Cultural Development, in 1981. The Center has also supported monographic and periodical publication of important titles and bibliographic research on various subjects of social sciences in fulfillment of different sections of UNESCO'S Program.

Testimony of the work carried out by the Havana Regional Office are many publications, of all kinds, disseminated and made widely available in all countries of the Region with the conviction that to safeguard heritage means to promote cultural diversity and to further human creativity, to promote solidarity, human cohesion, to develop the sense of identity of peoples and to contribute to sustainable development. Therefore, the collections of the Documentation Center, throughout these five decades, reflect as well the work carried out by the UNESCO Office in Havana.

It has also assembled and developed a vast collection of books, magazines, posters and other documents, from institutions in the spheres of social sciences of Latin America and the Caribbean, putting this information and the knowledge contained in these documents at the disposal of local as well as regional users, since its creation, and now by means of the new technologies of information and communication.

Therefore, when the actions of UNESCO'S Office in the Region are mentioned, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that closely associated with them and supporting them have always been and are the actions of the Documentation Center. (See ANNEXE 2: Testimonials) This is especially true in connection with the use of the bibliographic and documentary materials conserved in the heritage collections, which continue to this day supplying the information required for implementing these actions, including documents published at present by the Headquarters, which are of vital importance for the Region.

We could refer to the many collections of the Documentation Center of UNESCO'S Havana Regional Office, but we are present only a few samples that can be seen in ANNEXE 1.

As the President of IFLA, Mrs, Claudia Lux, has said in her welcoming address to this IFLA Congress (Milan 2009), at the core of these efforts is the contribution of libraries, through the preservation of the documentary evidence of the roots of the peoples and by providing an equitable access to information and knowledge for all, to improve the quality of life of peoples and communities, thereby contributing not only to the creation of the future, but of a better world.

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ANNEXE 1

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ANNEXE 2

Testimonials

“Right at the beginning of the restoration works of the former Government House, Municipal Palace and residence of Spain’s Captain Generals in the Island of Cuba. I went, in 1964, to UNESCO’S Regional Office in Havana. The Library and the collection of periodicals quenched my first thirst for knowledge, I was virtually dazzled by the projects that were being carried out to save the Abu Simbel monuments from the waters of the Aswan Dam... All that taught me and made me aware of the universal spirit of UNESCO, of the faith and promise of its founders; it outlined the great task that we had before us..”.

Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler
Historian of the City of Havana
Director of the Office of the Historian of the City
of Havana, Cuba



“The dissemination of information about monuments, movable property, the improvement of the cultural heritage, of archaeology and of the natural heritage has reached us through the Office in a variety of publications, calls to participate in different events, which have been of benedit for specialists and students... it must be emphasized also the role of efficient controller of the restoration projects approved by UNESCO, which have been carried out by the Office and that have given us the possibility of implementing all over the country... These and many other reasons, justify the importante of the role that the Regional Office plays as promoter of UNESCO’S Heritage Program in its field of action”.

Dra. Marta Arjona
Director of Cultural Heritage
Ministry of Culture of Cuba



“The UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean as made it possible in the last 50 years of 20th Century to carry out multiple actions in pursuit of a long sought utopia. A utopia founded on an identity for the region and the integration based upon the cultural diversity characterizing it. It is necessary to encourage and support the continuity of the Regional Office’s actions, its presence and development is necessary to us.”

Dr. Leopoldo Zea
Eminent Mexican Philosopher

