UNESCO Bangkok Director Reflects on Life in the UN and Beyond

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Eight years ago UNESCO Bangkok was a small tightly-knit but not terribly dynamic place. Now it has changed tremendously.

Sheldon Shaeffer, Director of UNESCO’s Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Bangkok, talked with Clive Wing about his career before his retirement in December, 2008.

Colleagues contributed questions for their outgoing director.

What’s your motto for success in life?

Work very hard for many hours a day, not just office hours. And, try many different things. When people introduce me and go through my résumé, three years here, five years there, I always semi-joke and say that I can’t keep a job anywhere. I think the ideal is to try to move around to do different things. One of the discouraging things about international agencies is people tend to stay forever.

I’m a believer in that people shouldn’t stay longer than five years.

That was the idea in the Ford Foundation where I was for three years. People would arrive, contribute and then move on. But that doesn’t happen. People get comfortable. The longer one stays the more difficult it becomes to go back to academia or find something else to do.

The idea of being able to move on every five years is a good one, although it’s not necessarily been planned into my career. Neither has going from country level to regional to global; or going from fairly narrow issues in education to a much broader range of education challenges – all of which I managed to do, sometimes more by accident than design. It’s proved to be a very rewarding career.

What advice would you give to newcomers to UNESCO to have a fruitful stay in the organization?

To have a long life in UNESCO is the opposite of what I recommend! But to have a fruitful career you have to ask how to be effective in your work, or how to do best for the world around you. Part of it is to be frank, open, and clear to people what you feel.

In UN agencies there is a tendency to be overly cautious. But to be both clear about intentions and beliefs, and also to be collaborative and sharing, is difficult. There’s a tendency, not just in the UN, to keep things to yourself. Try to be frank about balancing what you expect from the organization and what the organization expects from you. Don’t sacrifice yourself: strive for a balance with benefits for you and the organization.

How do you like to relax?

Sitting in my garden in Pattaya on a weekend afternoon with the International Herald Tribune crossword, and a glass of whisky!
Which of your dreams has yet to come true?

From a personal point of view I can’t think of any, which worries me! I’ve had a rich and rewarding career. I’ve had a series of fulfilling relationships. I am where I want to be now. I did think of where in the world I could go if I ever want to get on another aeroplane. Machu Picchu and Easter Island came to mind. In terms of professional dreams yet to come true, one is assisting the Thai education system to analyse its challenges more systematically and respond to them more comprehensively, but that’s proved too difficult.

And an unexpected moment in the office which has touched or shocked?

What touched me the most was my 60th birthday celebration in the office garden. It was a wonderful evening with the planting of a memorial tree, lots of people and amazing entertainment...it was much more warm-hearted than I could have expected. The most shocking moment was the reaction in Thailand to the nomination of Preah Vihear as a world heritage site. We knew it had its potential pitfalls, but it was a disaster: difficult from a public relations standpoint within UNESCO, between levels of UNESCO, between offices in UNESCO and between countries. Reaction to it was more than any of us could have predicted.

Do you have a remedy for jet lag?

I hate to return to whisky, but... whisky and sleeping pills. But I always try to adjust immediately to the time of where I’m landing. So I will get on the flight to Paris at midnight in Bangkok and try to stay awake as long as I can so that I go to sleep at midnight Paris time.

How do you remain attentive during less than stimulating meetings?

I take a lot of work with me. And I sit in places where people can’t see me working. And now that we have the wireless internet, phone and laptops, I can do my work and look up occasionally to convince others that I’m taking notes when I’m really doing email.

But at that moment when drowsiness arrives, what do you do to stay awake?

I sleep enough so I don’t get drowsy!

Is it true that wherever you are in the world you get up at 3am and do your email?

Not true. 4.30 a.m. perhaps...

You were in the team that developed Child Friendly Schools. How did that come about?

I was the regional education advisor for UNICEF in Bangkok at the time. We were working with Save the Children and others. The real idea that we had in UNICEF was that if we take the Convention of the Rights of the Child and interpret it at the school level, what does a rights-based school look like, what does it reflect? We realized that the rights discourse at the time was a bit difficult and wouldn’t sell, as governments were allergic 10-12 years ago to rights-based analysis. Therefore, we had the idea of a child friendly school. And that led to five different components which were amended and changed and took 3-4 years to move along. At the time, WHO had its own definition of what a child-
friendly school was: psychological happiness. But we felt that a child friendly school also has to be academically effective, and not viewed entirely in terms of mental health. I’m pleased that our work on this is used in fifty countries or so.

You’ve worked in UNICEF and UNESCO. Which would you rather be: the Executive Director of UNICEF or the Director General of UNESCO?

I’ve thought about that. Without being disloyal to UNESCO, probably the Executive Director of UNICEF. Partly because at that level of the system, one is dealing with a more simplified governance structure in UNICEF. You have an executive board which is smaller than UNESCO’s, and you don’t have a General Conference of all Member States. So you get reflections of member states’ requirements and needs, but the governance structure is less top heavy, less complicated. That gives the Executive Director of UNICEF, with his or her deputies, the ability to be more proactive and flexible in policy-making and planning, without being unresponsive to the needs of Member States.

When I first came to UNESCO, the first General Conference I attended had a panel on other agencies and UNESCO, and I was asked to reflect on this. I made the point that in UNICEF, being sent to headquarters in New York was a punishment; whereas in UNESCO being sent to the field was a punishment. That’s changed, but only a little. When people are volunteering or moving to the field, I think there are colleagues in UNESCO Paris who wonder; and the resistance to staff rotation makes that an issue too. The centralized hierarchic management structure in UNESCO, which has changed somewhat, is still very different to what you find in UNICEF. What I like about UNESCO, although I used to laugh a bit on the pretence of it being an “intellectual” agency, (which I now think, in fact, it is in many ways), is that the normative stances it takes are very important. And the broad intersectoral nature of what it has as a UN agency - with the broadest mandate - is very rich.

It’s the levels of authority, complex processes, the lack of collaboration, the lack of trust in the field, even lack of quality assurance of some work done in UNESCO, that are some of the downsides. Whereas in UNICEF, it was always a struggle to promote education as an issue because there was always competition among the sectors. You don’t find that as much in UNESCO partly because education is the principle sector. To arrive in UNESCO, when I’d spent my life in other organizations fighting for education and its share of the budget, to find that education is the first priority was a real comfort.

Statistics drip of your tongue but you seem ‘itchy’ about numbers and very wary of saying that anything is 99 percent. Why are you suspicious of statistics and statisticians?

The one graduate course I took in statistics I got an A in. But it was an open book test so you could remind yourself what the formula meant! I’m an anthropologist by training whose 300 page Ph.D. dissertation had one table in it. The other 299 pages are text and analysis which was always my instinct. In several agencies where I’ve worked, I’ve had to fight for qualitative research methodologies as being as valid and reliable as quantitative ones. Proving the richness of small numbers of samples as compared to what is seen to be the reliability of large sets of data, has always been a struggle. I’m not averse to them but I find it difficult to sit down and read accurately a complicated statistical table. I’ve always felt it was more important to understand facts and information from a qualitative perspective, rather than to try and analyse them only from a
statistical point of view. Statistics can be useful to identify a problem for further qualitative research or to prove a hypothesis, but they have to be seen as complementary.

Isn’t it a scandal that we still have at least 510 million people in Asia who are illiterate?

I would consider it even more scandalous because the number you quoted is based more often on answering “Yes” to the question “Are you literate?” Or, “Did you go to school for 5 years?”

What we’ve found in countries where we’ve done representative sample surveys of literacy performance, is that the actual rate is 20-25 per cent less. I keep saying to UNESCO and ministers of education, “don’t quote the 510 million figure, assume it’s 640 million “.

Take into account, too, that the literacy gap between those who speak the national language and those who speak other languages at home is bigger; and the gap between men and women is bigger; as is the gap between urban and rural dwellers. So the scandal is even greater.

But it’s traditionally been difficult to get donors interested in adult literacy. For example, at the Jomtien Conference in 1990, trying to get the World Bank to consider illiteracy an important issue was difficult. The feeling was “let’s not deal with illiterate adults because eventually they’ll disappear. So instead, let’s try to make all children literate”.

Never mind the loss of a generation! This is such a mistake when you’re trying to deal with literate families and literate parents encouraging their children to go to school. Adults have literacy needs as well. The Literacy Decade and literacy conferences that have been held recently in an attempt to put it higher on the agenda, have had a bit of an impact but much more should be done. Governments should do surveys of literacy to find out the real nature of the problem.

This also links to the other major problem that UNESCO should do more about, which is the quality of education in school. What we’re finding out more and more from international studies and national studies like those done recently in Thailand, is that a large percentage of children in school are not literate. So this assumption of the past – let’s concentrate on school children and make them literate so we don’t have to worry about them in future - isn’t true either.

The truth is that a relatively large percentage of students in school are not considered functionally literate. That’s a developed and a developing world phenomenon. UNESCO doesn’t have enough focus on learning assessment and measuring achievement. Much needs to be done of the transition from early childhood to a successful career in primary school; to be much more focused on ensuring the real quality of grades one and two, the early grades.

Being able to create a strong foundation in literacy also means extra training for teachers. If you don’t get literate in the first few years, then you’re likely to drop out and never become literate. Very few teacher training systems around the world identify teachers early on who will teach the initial grades, and give them special skills to do so. And very few education systems put their best teachers in grades one and two.

There’s a common misconception that UNESCO does all the things it advocates, for example, we train all the teachers in Thailand. How do you describe our work?
I say that we don’t! What we strive to do is influence the curriculum of Thailand’s teacher training institutions and the training methods used in those institutions, so that better teachers are the result.

This is difficult because every country has a different mechanism for teacher training. Some have more focus on in-service than pre-service training or vice versa. But even with a focus on pre-service, in Thailand you have a Dean’s Forum of teacher training faculties, and faculties of education, and they take a lot of decisions about teacher training curricula. In another country you might have a Director-General of Teacher Education where the curriculum is decided. In other countries teacher training institutions are quite independent. They follow a general curriculum but can decide individually how they want to do it.

So it’s difficult to intervene in a standard fashion in teacher education reform. But in general, what we try to do is improve the content of what is taught in teacher education. That means adding in not only good methodologies and things like literacy, but also the content areas that we think are important: sustainable development, gender, human rights education...a whole range of more values-based topics. It also means looking in general at teacher education policies: how are they being made and how can we influence them?

**How has the Regional Bureau changed under your leadership?**

Decentralisation has been important. It’s led to additional funding, staff and authorities and responsibilities. The office is considerably larger now than it was. We’ve added or expanded programmes - ICT, ESD, HIV/AIDS - for example, and attracted many more long term consultants and interns. Take Information and Knowledge Management, IKM, which has consolidated different activities and extended its reach to field offices. This is an important change. So part of it is quantitative, statistically speaking, in terms of numbers of people and amount of funds. I also think there is a much greater responsiveness to the field. I came in shortly after the Director General began the decentralization exercise when we’d been called PROAP – Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific – covering all sectors, but with a focus in South-East and East Asia. By labelling us clearly as a Regional Bureau, working with the other 13 field offices, we had to respond. So if you look now at mission plans compared to seven or eight years ago, we get out to the Pacific and Central Asia and West Asia much more than in the past. We’re also much less of an operational agency. We used to have a lot of regional programmes focused on trying out in the field different kinds of pilot projects - community learning centres for example. Now the focus is much more on capacity building, norm setting and quality assurance – responsibilities that we’re meant to have under the decentralization policy. It used to be that we would barge in and handle the things that we wanted to do. Now we try to respond to requests. We have much more concern for broader issues and assistance to the field offices, and not only in content programme areas. It includes the IKM function, IT, and the administration unit servicing the field offices, which I feel is important.

**Has the Regional Bureau made a difference?**

On the one hand there is serious policy-oriented work that has gone on in the past in areas like student subsidy schemes: serious long term work that is now being applied in secondary education and education finance. That’s commitment from an academic perspective: coming up with the best
knowledge that we can manage to get. From an operational point of view, you have things like the community learning centres which have been going on for many years. Over half the countries in the region have versions of them and are working to improve and expand them. That to me is of great consequence. The normative work we do in higher education is another example.

We’re doing pioneering work in education for sustainable development, ESD, leading the work in policy, establishing indicators and inserting ESD into curricula. Then there is the work in ICT, the policy-makers toolkit, and trying to develop clear ICT policies in many countries, rather than have them set by the latest IT vendor who appears in the minister’s office. The HIV/AIDS work, especially for high risk groups like MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), unparalleled in UNESCO and other agencies, makes us stand out as a leader.

The mid-decade assessment of Education for All, done comprehensively in this region (much more so than elsewhere) and serious long term statistical capacity building of institutions and individuals leading to a series of reliable mid-decade assessments, has also been a major achievement. It has focused on reaching the excluded and inclusive education, and pinpointed the plight of children not enrolled in school, illiteracy and the importance of mother-tongue education. The assessment brings attention to gender issues and identifies the full range of factors affecting education. I hope it pushes governments not to be satisfied with 95 percent enrolment, but to really look after that 5 percent of children outside the education system. And that’s what a child friendly school does. It’s a child-seeking school looking for children not in school and doing something about it.

In Culture, moving beyond what we are known for – World Heritage Sites (which we’ve been punished for! [ed. Preah Vihear]) – to sustainable tourism, local management of tourism, architectural conservation, and raising the awareness of ministries of culture in the region of the potential of tourism not only from an economic point of view but also the preservation of heritage for a sustainable future, has also been a major contribution. The bioethics of science and technology is pioneering work generating interest in ministries where before there was none, as is our consistent focus on the freedom of information and expression.

**Any regrets?**

The constant struggle with headquarters in terms of centralization. What I see now is a creeping recentralisation of authority back to Paris headquarters: the assumption that because of difficulties in a few field offices, all field offices have to be subject to increasing oversight; and the difficulty of UNESCO sanctioning after the fact as opposed to trying to standardize beforehand. Constant tension takes up a huge amount of time: whether it relates to staffing, budgeting, or approvals in headquarters of things like mission plans, publications... I think that when one talks about changes to be seen in ten years, or is decentralization working, the tipping point will be the new Director General, what he or she thinks about the balance between headquarters and the field, the focus on sectors as opposed to intersectoral platforms, the ability of offices to have a bundle of money to decide how it is spent among the sectors rather than being assigned from each sector, the extent to which sectors regrettably operate independently of each other so that each has a different mechanism for staff rotation, budgeting and programming which complicates life tremendously... these are important decisions that the new Director General will have to make.
If the One UN experiment develops further, will it be UNESCO that takes these decisions and others about standardization, or the UN as a whole?

That’s important and might very well happen. We’ve found it a very labour intensive process to take part in One UN exercises like in Viet Nam. The jury is still out in a sense. Five years down the line we’ll see whether it has made us and the UN system more effective. There is a UNESCO decentralization task force that will meet in January. The decisions taken about regional functions, field office authorities and headquarters oversight, are going to be very important to the organization. And that’s what worries me because there’s no guarantee that what I consider to be the important trend towards decentralization will continue.

What have been the best of times?

The warmth and receptivity that I’ve found in the staff here since I arrived have been tremendous. When I think of other places I’ve worked, the cooperation I’ve received across the office and the willingness of colleagues to move along to help make the office proactive and dynamic, has been dramatic. Eight years ago it was a small tightly-knit but not terribly dynamic place. That has changed a lot. I regret that there hasn’t been even more of that, that we haven’t been able to work more intersectorally, for example. We haven’t done enough evaluation and assessment of the work done in terms of long-term impact. My successor can look into that.