The Early Yars of UNESCO-ICSU Partnership

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SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

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The International Association of Academies, established in October 1899, did not survive the First World War. The victorious countries established the International Research Council in July 1919. Membership of the Central Powers became possible as from 1926. The IRC was renamed the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) in July 1931. While science was not a priority for the Organization of Intellectual Co-operation, linked to the League of Nations, ICSU gave a united voice to the eight scientific unions it encompassed and to the national constituencies of its forty-one member states. However, ICSU had only eight years to develop before the Second World War broke out, rendering the Council dormant.

With victory drawing near, the Allied countries and scientific communities started to discuss ways of reviving international scientific cooperation. In 1944, the US National Academy of Sciences sought out scientists and institutions in Allied countries to ask for their preferences. The result was the Cannon-Field report. For the majority of the scientists (most of them from the USA and UK), the highest priority was the revival of ICSU. They wanted the Unions to develop autonomously, free from the intervention of inter-governmental institutions. Joseph Needham, along with a minority of scientists, thought that ICSU alone was not equipped to meet the new challenges of scientific cooperation. They proposed an International Scientific Service, to be established and supported by Allied governments, as a complement to ICSU.

The context changed with the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The political decision was taken to include science in UNESCO in November 1945. A privileged partnership was soon established with ICSU. Needham's proposals to this end were accepted, in July 1946, by the UNESCO Preparatory Commission, as well as by the first post-war ICSU General Assembly. The final agreement was signed on 16 December 1946. Cooperation involved all aspects of the natural sciences programme. It was based on mutual support. UNESCO helped ICSU and its Unions to revive and develop, with the establishment of new Unions and an increased participation by non-Western countries. In the early years, nearly one third of the UNESCO science budget was earmarked to support ICSU. In return, ICSU participated in many UNESCO projects, offering its independent expertise, playing the de facto role of a "scientific advisory council" for UNESCO.

At times, the partnership was not easy. The UNESCO Secretariat wished to have a hands-on operational role in many scientific endeavors; yet, some member states wanted ICSU to be the executive body for all UNESCO activities in science. Some ICSU scientists worried that UNESCO would bring political interference into the neutral realm of science. Nevertheless, a satisfactory balance was found, and the partnership turned out to be sustainable and very fruitful for both bodies.