

UNESCO: the decline of civil society in the face of national commissions

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Summary

Since its creation, UNESCO has claimed a central role in promoting intercultural dialogue, peace and sustainable development. (...)

This article analyses the consequences of this shift on UNESCO's governance through the concepts of social regulation (Reynaud), associative autonomy (Laville & Sainsaulieu) and complex thinking (Morin).

Full text

Since its creation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has claimed a central role in promoting intercultural dialogue, peace and sustainable development worldwide. An essential part of this mission is the active participation of international civil society, particularly through accredited associations and NGOs, which bring diversity, expertise and grassroots support. Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO between 1987 and 1999, embodies this vision by describing the Organisation as the "home of global civil society" (Hamrol, 2025).

However, relations between UNESCO, its Member States and civil society have evolved in a paradoxical manner in recent years. The strengthening of the coordination and oversight functions exercised by National Commissions – associative structures most often under state supervision – is gradually reducing the autonomy of associations and restricting their direct participation. This phenomenon, accentuated by the regulatory framework adopted in 2017, raises questions about governance at UNESCO, its respect for democratic pluralism and its ability to respond to contemporary challenges.

The National Commissions, initially designed as coordinating bodies, have expanded their role to become regulators and supervisors of accredited clubs and federations. Although recognised as essential partners for the legitimacy and implementation of programmes, the latter are constrained by national policies that limit their autonomy. In this context, the Commissions act as arbitrary filters that restrict the diversity of voices within the Organisation.

For Laville and Sainsaulieu (2019), associations cannot be reduced to mere instruments of execution. They are collective actors that promote autonomous social projects and foster democratic ties. They represent spaces for experimentation, constructive conflict and institutional creativity, capable of bringing about new forms of participation, deliberation and civic engagement. In a transnational space such as UNESCO, their role goes far beyond that of a relay: they act as political actors capable of influencing international policy through a process of co-construction. Their institutionalisation therefore requires effective recognition of their autonomy, which is essential for maintaining the plurality and vitality of global civil society.

The 2017 regulatory framework strengthened the pre-eminence of National Commissions. Accredited associations have been transformed into executors of state priorities, losing their power of initiative and critical capacity. One of the major paradoxes is the ban on accredited associations using the UNESCO logo and acronym. Such a restriction, which aims to preserve institutional integrity, contradicts the recognised role of these associations as field relays and strategic partners of the Organisation. Preventing these actors from symbolically claiming UNESCO's support weakens their legitimacy, even though they are mobilised to disseminate and implement its values and programmes. This inconsistency illustrates the gap between the logic of control exercised by the National Commissions and the inclusive and participatory approach that UNESCO claims to promote.

This shift contradicts the principle of autonomy defended by Laville and Sainsaulieu and weakens the transformative potential of associations. Reynaud's theory of rules (1989) helps to understand the depth of this change. Reynaud distinguishes between three forms of regulation: control regulation, imposed by a hierarchical authority; autonomous regulation, developed by the actors themselves; and joint regulation, resulting from ongoing negotiation between regulators and the regulated. Only the latter guarantees the legitimacy of rules and their ability to adapt.

The framework adopted in 2017 replaces joint regulation with a regulatory control approach. Associations are deprived of the opportunity to participate in the development of the standards that govern their collective action and, consequently, of the flexibility needed to adapt to changing contexts. UNESCO clubs and federations find themselves locked into the political logic of Member States, while the intellectual, scientific and cultural dimension of the Organisation is being overshadowed by national and geopolitical interests.

This gradual subordination weakens UN governance. Decisions are becoming more centralised, reducing the plurality of voices and the diversity of initiatives. UNESCO's ability to mobilise an engaged and innovative international civil society is considerably weakened. This refocusing also reflects the growing tensions between national sovereignty and global governance, where the logic of control and influence is taking precedence over cooperation and multistakeholder dialogue. The Organisation thus sees its mission

weakened in the face of major issues such as peace, education, sustainable development and the protection of cultural heritage.

Edgar Morin's complex thinking (1990, 2005) provides a framework for moving beyond this. It invites us to conceive of UNESCO as a dynamic and multidimensional system in which the diversity of actors and knowledge constitutes a strategic resource. Social systems cannot be understood through linear or centralised logic. Governance inspired by this vision recognises the plurality of approaches and the need for constant adaptability. International civil society cannot be reduced to a subordinate function

; it must be recognised as a strategic partner capable of co-constructing innovative responses to major global challenges.

In this context, it is necessary to move beyond the control mechanisms imposed by the regulatory framework and establish open, flexible and multidimensional dialogue processes. Diversity of knowledge, experience and cultures then becomes a lever for synergy, generating solutions adapted to contemporary complexities.

The current situation highlights a deep tension between national sovereignty and UNESCO's transnational vocation. The challenge now is to devise hybrid institutional mechanisms capable of guaranteeing both associative autonomy and state legitimacy. The role of UNESCO Clubs and Federations as collective actors promoting democracy must be rethought in the light of new approaches that restore civil society to its rightful place within UNESCO. This requires moving beyond governance based on regulatory control in favour of joint regulation, built on ongoing negotiation of rules between States and associations. UNESCO can thus be seen as a polycentric and adaptive system, where the diversity of actors is an essential resource. The plurality of approaches, knowledge and experiences does not result in fragmentation, but rather in the possibility of generating renewed dynamics of cooperation. This configuration fosters the emergence of synergies that strengthen the Organisation's capacity to adapt to changing contexts and develop more relevant collective responses to complex global challenges.

These contributions converge towards a need for change: redefining the role of National Commissions. Their mission should evolve towards mediation and facilitation rather than control. In this perspective, the accreditation committee system appears largely inadequate, both in terms of its often formal and poorly contextualised criteria and its opaque procedures. Rigorous evaluation, based on transparent indicators and shared monitoring mechanisms, is essential to ensure the relevance and legitimacy of the accreditation process.

Such a reorientation implies not only a review of control and accreditation practices, but also the establishment of forms of governance capable of articulating associative autonomy and institutional legitimacy. This requires the creation of mechanisms

such as joint co-regulatory bodies with genuine decision-making powers and mechanisms for the established and shared evaluation of actions. Such mechanisms would strengthen UNESCO's legitimacy by placing its action within a broader framework of cooperation in which States and civil society participate jointly in the production of standards.

Rethinking UNESCO's governance goes beyond simple internal reform. The challenge is paradigmatic for the entire multilateral system. By reaffirming its role as a "home for global civil society " (Hamrol, 2025), UNESCO could become a true laboratory for global governance, based on the co-construction of rules, the synergy of differences and the recognition of associative autonomy as a pillar of international democracy. Such an orientation would give substance to the ideals of peace, dialogue and sustainable development by embedding them in the very practices of the institution.

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