Introduction to Debate on UIA Products and Services

The detailed achievements in relation to this topic are presented separately in the Activity Report. The concern here is to point to issues relating to UIA products and services that may assist debate on their future development, notably in relation to articulation of UIA’s strategy and relation to international bodies.

Context

It is useful to provide a context for this debate as the outcome of activity under Article 3 of the Statutes. This summarizes the UIA aims as “having a scientific aim, operating as an institute for research, study, information, consultation, promotion and service”. In elaborating these points, the focus is on the documentary activity and related study of “transnational associative networks”. There is no explicit reference in the English text to “facilitating” the activities of such bodies - other than through undertaking “all activity aimed at promoting the development and efficiency” of such networks.

There has always been a tendency to regret that the UIA does not do more to “facilitate” or “assist” NGOs – or even to “represent” them -- whilst at the same time implicitly deprecating the value of the documentary activities most explicitly specified under its Statutes – and reflecting its core activity over a century. These issues tend to be focused through concern about the degree of “visibility” of the UIA, its products and its services – despite its early and notable presence on the web.

It is however this documentary activity that has always been the principal source of UIA funding and (with the exception of funds generated by journal subscriptions) is now the only reason for which it receives additional funds (as evidenced by the contractual initiatives with the European Commission, the World Bank, and Verisign). Such activity was of course the basis for the 1950 ECOSOC Resolution concerning the UIA’s Yearbook of International Organizations, for its placement on the ECOSOC (Consultative Status) Register in 1951 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, its relationship with UNESCO, and for the current subscription of a consortium of UN bodies (negotiated by SAUR) to the UIA’s online databases.

It is useful to recognize that UIA funding is unlike that of many other NGOs and IGOs. It is not a mini-United Nations, dependant annually on funds from its Full Members or their capacity to facilitate access to funding – in fact only a handful of Full Members (notably Paul Caron, Pierre Harmel, and James Wellesley-Wesley) have contributed significantly to UIA funding. Unlike many NGOs, the UIA is also not dependent, for the long-term continuity of its activities, on ability to obtain funding or subventions from irregular and unpredictable sources.

Strategic implications

Within its constrained resource framework, the Secretariat has tended to focus on ways of “facilitating” and “representing” through its self-funded core documentary
activities -- rather than through separate activities for which specific funding had to be found. It is through its information activity that the UIA “represents” all international nonprofit bodies, and their concerns, in a more comprehensive, detailed and unbiased manner than is possible in any other mode of activity. The innovative scientific approach to information handling is explicitly appreciated by academic bodies (consistent with the “scientific” provision of Article 3). Its approach to increasing the “visibility” of international bodies was the particular reason for which it received funds for its major “multi-media” contract with the European Commission.

In debating UIA products and services there is therefore merit in reflecting on what new approach might be taken if the current pattern of activities is deemed unsatisfactory:

- revising the Statutes (as now envisaged) to focus the activities more clearly, possibly away from the “scientific” emphasis
- articulating separate activities under the existing Statutes that might relate more closely to expectations regarding “facilitating”
- recognizing the extent to which the “facilitation” mandate is fulfilled through its documentary activities, and especially through the new possibilities of the web that are so successfully employed by many NGOs
- reorganization of the information programme on the assumption that it has inherent inefficiencies which, if removed, could free up funds for other activities of higher priority

In considering these choices, consideration could be given to

- impact on the already constrained budget of the information activity by allocating resources it generates to separate activities that tend not to generate resources
- any need to modify the personnel skill-set and the associated costs and implications for existing resource-generating programmes
- how the UIA is to take a visible position on the burning issues which concern many NGOs that gather at relevant UN Conferences: environment (Johannesburg), human rights (Durban), trade (Cancun), women (Beijing), social development (Geneva), for example -- or those acting on issues by which the UN is challenged: globalization (Porto Alegre) or military invasion (of Afghanistan, Iraq, etc)
- ability to generate resources for continuing programmes in the light of the challenges in this respect faced by other bodies
- the extent to which any new activities would place the UIA in competition with many other existing bodies that perceive themselves to have mandates in relation to “facilitating” and “representing” NGOs -- and perhaps more effectively than the UIA could aspire to achieve

Challenges with strategic implications

The core statutory activities of the UIA are essentially in good health financially, thanks to the creative teamwork of a group of people that is frequently called upon to reconfigure in response to new challenges. The core activities are nevertheless faced with a range of challenges:
**Information collection:** Strategies have been developed (notably by Joel Fischer) to respond more effectively to the ever-increasing amount of information and its availability on the web although this is a major challenge in the case of meeting information. In this respect the relation with complex IGOs has however deteriorated. As increasingly under-resourced bodies, the quality of IGO responses to UIA queries regarding their profiles is diminishing, due to a combination of factors on their side (continuing reorganization, priorities, inadequate information, lack of historical context, reluctance to take responsibility, tendency to revisionism in light of public relations information placed on website).

**Integration:** The UIA has successfully integrated most of its disparate online databases into a common framework (notably thanks to the efforts of Tomáš Fülöpp). Major procedural, normative and organizational challenges however remain in relation to integration between organization and meeting information and the statistics derived from them.

**Historical information:** Although the recovery of 100 years of documents (thanks to the support of Jacques de Mévius) is close to completion, notably in relation to the UIA journal (and the links to bibliographical databases), the challenge of integrating the current journal with such material remains to be resolved.

**Dated information:** Although the UIA online databases relating to the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (problems, strategies, values, etc) continue to attract attention, their potential for marketing (via SAUR), image generation (*Yearbook Volume 5*), promotion of NGO concerns, and scientific collaboration (notably the knowledge management concerns of the Global Brain Group) are progressively eroded because only voluntary staff time (notably Nadia McLaren) is allocated to their maintenance. Provision for such work is however specifically made under Article_3.

**Boundaries:** There is considerable, and increasing, pressure to make available significant proportions of UIA data assets in an increasingly competitive environment. The issue is what demands are to be refused as excessive (or subject to heavy financial constraints) whether from commercial bodies (controlled by the Associate Member relationship), from academic bodies (notably in relation to the LSE *Yearbook of Civil Society*), from NGOs (such as addresses for conference promotion), or from IGOs (in some cases plagiarising UIA data). Staff capacity to negotiate on a case-by-case basis is constrained. The issue is further complicated by concerns about protecting the relationship to NGOs through imposing constraints on spamming using UIA data.

**Facilitating “through”:** Within the resources of its “publication” budget, the Secretariat has successfully sought ways of increasing the availability worldwide (and at minimal or zero cost) of the results of its work by the use of its web-based databases (notably through the innovations of Tomáš Fülöpp). This is complex because of SAUR’s contractual constraints on the use of some data. However all data on the problems and strategies recognized by international bodies is, for example, freely available. Efforts have been made to allow all NGOs access to all organizational data relating to themselves and bodies with which they indicate relationships. Users can also benefit freely from visualization of such networks online.
**Internet problems:** The computer systems on which UIA activities are highly dependent are vulnerable on a daily basis to the many widely publicized problems (virus attacks, denial of service, spam, hacking, identity fraud, etc). These challenges have so far been contained (notably thanks to the efforts of Joel Fischer).

**Complexity:** It is important to recognize that severe constraints on personnel resources have traditionally been compensated within the UIA Secretariat by considerable enhancement of productivity through creative use of advanced information technology. The downside is that aspects of this are highly complex and dependent on ongoing learning that may be difficult to share effectively within a team. Some long-term contractual activities (notably the online service and that relating to statistics) are now especially vulnerable to challenges of personnel continuity.

**Computer problems:**

**Hardware:** The Secretariat has always been extremely prudent in its investment in computer hardware, but in 2003 was faced with major failure of its aging network server (partly due to dust resulting from work on the MAI building). Ensuring the integration of the replacement server according to specifications has posed major challenges (notably to Joel Fischer and Tomáš Fülöpp). **Software:** Daily database and production work is also highly dependent on the increasingly obsolete software/workstation combinations that have been designed to create dependence on suppliers. Ensuring an appropriate upgrade pathway to ensure backwards compatibility, maximize productivity (including remote editing) and reduce dependence remains a major challenge – especially in the face of emergent and unforeseeable incompatibles. **Maintenance:** Ensuring the viability of such systems on a 24 hours basis, 7 days a week (including holiday periods) without costly maintenance contracts, remains a concern.

**Personnel:** As indicated above, response to the above operational challenges cannot be based on the assumption that the UIA is a mini-UN in which appropriate skills (including languages) can be readily hired from a politically correct range of countries at an attractive level of remuneration, relocation costs and social security benefits – and in which key personnel are readily replaceable if they leave. Many of the Secretariat tasks require long periods of familiarization, which is problematic in a context in which relatively rapid personnel turnover is increasingly the norm.

**Project development and support:** The uncertainties regarding the core strategy and direction of development of the UIA aggravate the issues relating to personnel – especially with regard to the development of collaborative project relationships with other bodies to generate new funding. The implications may be seen in the case of possible project proposals to the European Commission (6th Framework: for which the UIA is well placed because of its information activity) where the time cycle of proposal prospection, development, evaluation and execution may well exceed the time over which the responsible personnel – with appropriate skills – remain associated with the UIA.