Report on UIA Information / Research Activities
in support of Civil Society

Following the pattern of the report on this theme to the General Assembly in 2003, the detailed achievements are presented within the separately distributed *Summary of Activities of the UIA Secretariat*. The concern here is to point to continuing 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 its relations with international bodies. This report is therefore an updated version of that presented to the previous General Assembly.

**Context**

Documentary activity that has always been the principal source of UIA funding (with the exception of funds generated by journal subscriptions) is now the **only** reason for which it receives additional funds. 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.

UIA’s documentary activity is mandated under Article 3 of its Statutes, which describes the UIA as “having a scientific aim, operating as an institute for research, study, information, consultation, promotion and service”. The focus of its founders was on the documentary activity and the related study of what became known as “transnational associative networks” -- “aimed at promoting the development and efficiency” of such networks.

It is useful to recognize that UIA funding is unlike that of many other NGOs and IGOs. It is not a mini-United Nations, dependent annually on funds from its Full Members or on their capacity to facilitate access to funding – in fact only a handful of Full Members (notably Paul Caron, Robert Fenaux, Pierre Harmel, Nadia McLaren, Jacques de Mévius, and James Wellesley-Wesley) have contributed significantly to UIA access to 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**

Through its self-funded core documentary activities, 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 – and is unique amongst NGOs in doing so over an extended period of time. The innovative scientific approach to information handling is explicitly appreciated by academic bodies (consistent with the “scientific” provision of Article 3) and funding organizations (as evidenced by the contractual initiatives with the European Commission, the World
Bank, Verisign, LSE, and other potential contract partners, whether academic or commercial).

**New range of activities:** 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”, or “service” or “representation” of international organizations
- recognizing the extent to which the “facilitation” mandate is fulfilled through its documentary activities, and especially through the new and emerging 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

**Considerations:** 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 may not 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 international events
- ability to generate resources for its continuing, long-term documentary 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 more explicit mandates in relation to “facilitating” and “representing” NGOs -- and possibly already acting more effectively than the UIA could aspire to achieve in those areas

**Challenges with strategic implications**

A separate document, presented to the Bureau (January 2005) and distributed to the Council, *Current UIA Vulnerabilities and Exposure to Risk* (January 2005), provides a detailed checklist of challenges facing the UIA.

The core research 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 institutional budgetary context is however currently problematic – as in the case of many other bodies.
These core activities are faced with a range of specific challenges, which are summarized in a table distributed as a separate document *Matching Information Challenges, Opportunities and Goals* (Doc 6.2):

1. **Information collection:** Strategies have been developed 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 organizations has however deteriorated. As increasingly under-resourced bodies, the quality of their 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, focus on information placed on website that may not be conveniently accessible or summarized). It is important to note the consequences of the severe UIA cost-cutting exercise in 2004-5, as applied to posted questionnaires to organizations. This has resulted in a diminution of the effective replies from organizations -- notably from those overwhelmed or challenged by the e-mail environment, on which current questionnaires are primarily dependent. The e-proof system has however been improved by Joel Fischer and Nancy Carfrae by upgrading it to rich text (RTF) format.

2. **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 – in order to build on their synergy, which so significantly distinguishes the UIA initiatives from others for the moment.

3. **Historical information:** The recovery of 100 years of UIA documents, including *Transnational Associations* and its predecessors is completed (thanks to the support of Jacques de Mévius) journal (with links to bibliographical databases). Further issues relating to this initiative are still to be addressed

4. **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) is progressively eroded because only voluntary time (notably that of Nadia McLaren) is allocated to their maintenance. Provision for such work is however specifically made under Article 3.

5. **Boundaries:** As indicated in the separate *Summary of Activities of the UIA Secretariat* report, 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 (constrained 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.
6. 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. Exploratory 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. Related approaches are being explored in the case of meeting information. In both cases the purpose is also to encourage controlled updating by the organizations themselves.

7. 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 and Tomáš Fülöpp, and with the external assistance of Flemming Funch).

8. Complexity: It is important to recognize that severe constraints on the “skeletal” 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.

9. Computer problems:
   - **Hardware**: The Secretariat has always been extremely prudent in its investment in computer hardware. In 2003 it was faced with major failure of its aging network server (partly due to dust resulting from renovation 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 (notably Win98) that had been designed to create dependence on suppliers. Ensuring an appropriate upgrade pathway, to guarantee backwards compatibility, maximize productivity (including remote editing) and reduce dependence, remains a major challenge – especially in the face of emergent and unforeseeable incompatibility.
   - **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.
   - **Applications**: Although systems may be operating relatively satisfactorily, there is constant pressure to upgrade them, if only to protect against vulnerabilities (virus attacks, etc). SAUR is quite demandng of improvements that are claimed to increase marketability of UIA online services.

10. 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, with relocation costs and social
security benefits – and in which key personnel are readily replaceable if they leave. Many of the Secretariat information tasks require long periods of familiarization, which is problematic in a world in which relatively rapid personnel turnover is increasingly the norm. This is notably evident in relation to the statistical programme. Efforts to delegate major editing/research tasks to reasonably trained people continue to demonstrate the need for a deeper understanding of the relationships between the various databases and the manner in which they may variously be held at different stages (AREV, .txt, SQL).

11. 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 and implementation 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.

12. Multi-media: As noted above and in earlier reports, the UIA is well-positioned to distinguish itself in terms of knowledge management and usability (notably by those involved in civil society and its issues) though its work on online multi-media visualization and sonification. The underlying network analysis is valued by the academic community (eg the contract proposal with Princeton University and Sydney University of Technology; contributions to computer specialist symposium on the emergent “global brain” to which the UIA contributed a paper on Simulating a Global Brain: using networks of international organizations, world problems, strategies, and values). One of the advantages of such work, as stressed on completion of the multi-media contract with the EU in 2000, is obtaining the minimal funding and expertise to ensure immediate development and implementation of such facilities, beyond what has already been achieved. Developmental work in this area has resulted in applications of direct relevance to the enhancement of UIA online services.

13. Emerging technologies: It is reasonably clear that the UIA’s current and future information work (and viable business models) will be strongly influenced by rapidly emergent software and hardware technologies. This has been evident for a decade or more (eg network technology, CD, web, etc). Technologies that are liable to constitute both challenges and opportunities include: search engines (Google, etc), semantic web, GRIDs and other "middleware" (as with the proposal made to NSF), forums (phpBB, TikiWiki, etc), content management systems, open source software (Linux, Wiki, etc), open source directories (Wikipedia, Open Source Directory, etc), internet telephony (Google, Skype). Many of these technologies will contribute actively to a redefinition of how “associations” work, meet and are legally defined, as well as reframing their sense of identity and “membership”, their duration and the nature of their relationships with other entities. This new environment will see increasing risks (viruses, fraud, spam, surveillance, plagiarism and other infringements of intellectual property, etc). It will also contribute significantly to information overload and information underuse.

Project proposals

See details in report on Summary of Activities of the UIA Secretariat (page 5)
Statistical programme
See details in report on Summary of Activities of the ULA Secretariat (page 4)

Development of information services
See details in report on Summary of Activities of the ULA Secretariat (page 4)

Communications: Members, Council, Secretariat
See details in report on Summary of Activities of the ULA Secretariat (page 9)

Research
See details in report on Summary of Activities of the ULA Secretariat (page 13)