

60 years of enabling positive change – a brief history of UNITAR

July 2023

Introduction

In 2023, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) celebrates its 60th anniversary. Striving to serve UN Member States through six decades, the Institute has transformed and been transformed, reaching today a phase of stability and strength. To commemorate this milestone, a dedicated team of current and veteran UNITAR staff joined forces¹, to capture the pivotal moments of the Institute’s past, and the birth and growth of some of its groundbreaking programmes.

This concise history highlights the origins and inspiration behind the establishment of UNITAR, delving into the ambitious and exploratory years of the 60s and 70s, as well as the trials and setbacks faced during the 80s and 90s. It further showcases the vision and leadership of successive Executive Directors and staff, who adeptly navigated challenges, adapted to changing circumstances, and solidified UNITAR's mandate. In the past two decades alone, UNITAR has experienced a remarkable expansion of its training programmes, witnessed impressive increases in the number of learners, and achieved a financial growth and stability.

May this brief history serve as a lasting testament to the invaluable lessons learned over the past 60 years, ensuring that future generations, entrusted with leading UNITAR in this new millennium, can draw upon these insights. By doing so, they will continue to serve and support the vast UNITAR constituency around the world, building upon the rich legacy of the past to shape a brighter future for all.

Hopeful Beginnings

The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) was born in 1963, in a moment of hope for international collaboration and human progress. Large numbers of newly independent states had emerged from the old colonial empires to join the United Nations (UN). Existing members of the General Assembly were searching for ways to manage this global change and to ensure that the UN system remained fit-for-purpose. Newer members wanted to see the UN adapted to meet the many challenges they faced, as well as needing training for their diplomatic representatives. In this period of hope, ambition and transition, UNITAR came together with “the unique purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of the United Nations itself” through training and research. Likened as an independent think tank with the UN system, it operated at arm’s length from the UN secretariat.



¹ The editorial team include Nassrine Azimi, Jonas Haertle, Akiko Perona, and many UNITAR colleagues in Geneva, Hiroshima and New York. Special thanks to former executive directors Marcel Boisard, Carlos Lopes and Sally Fegan-Wyles, and to the current executive director, Nikhil Seth, as well as to Jonathan Harris of King’s College London for their valuable contributions.

A small UN budget for training had existed since 1958, and training programmes had been instituted for the diplomats of newly independent states at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and in the Caribbean. Various philanthropic foundations and states stood ready to provide

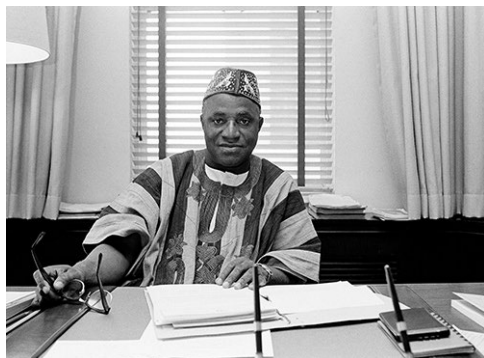


funding for a new institute, with a comparatively high level of investment coming from the states of the Global South. The United States government provided enough funds to ensure that the UNITAR programme could begin, and in 1964 the Rockefeller Foundation gifted the new institute what would become known as the UNITAR building, across the street from the UN headquarters in New York. Another enthusiastic supporter of UNITAR was the Swiss government.

UNITAR's first executive director was **Gabriel d'Arboussier** of Senegal (Term of Office 1965-1967). He was the first of four Africans in the role - a pattern which contributed to a sense of UNITAR responding particularly to the concerns of the newly independent states of the Global South. In 1965 d'Arboussier met with various world experts in Bellagio, Italy to agree on the programme of the new institute. A new research agenda was established under the direction of UN secretariat veteran Oscar Schachter, who would act as Deputy Executive Director for UNITAR's first decade, with an early emphasis on peacekeeping. The existing prior training programmes in Geneva were transferred to UNITAR.



Consolidations

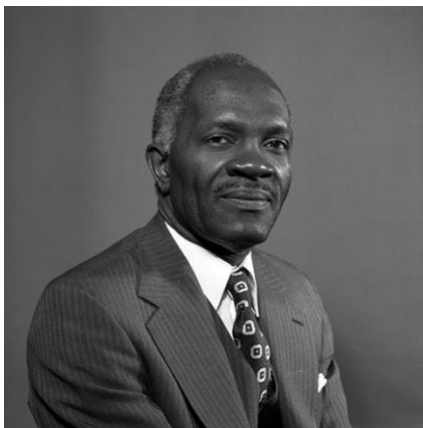
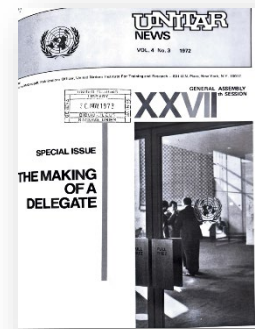


In 1968, **Chief S.O. Adebó** of Nigeria (Term of Office 1968-1972) was appointed as Executive Director. He oversaw the expansion of UNITAR training activities, establishing a new introductory seminar for diplomats assigned to UN permanent missions in New York, and regional training seminars in parts of Africa and the Caribbean. From 1967, UNITAR launched a fellowship programme both for junior diplomats, who

were hosted in Geneva and at the Hague Academy for International Law, and for more senior diplomats who undertook research on the UN system. A European office, located in Geneva, was opened in 1969. The idea of a UN staff college, which would later become the UN university, was much debated and championed by Adebó at the time.



Under Adebo's directorship, UNITAR began to hold conferences and publish important reports on the operation of the UN, in relation to questions of gender, economic justice, international education, and questions of reform to the UN Charter. As well as stand-alone research reports, UNITAR published a magazine which communicated its findings, and many of its training insights, to a wider readership across the UN system. One of the most successful of these publications was *The Making of a Delegate*, published in 1972 and quickly becoming something of a reference document for newly posted diplomats arriving at the UN.



With the appointment of **Dr Davidson Nicol** of Sierra Leone (Term of Office 1972-1982) as Executive Director in 1972, UNITAR's activities continued to expand. A scholar first and foremost, Nicol broadened the Institute's research efforts. When in 1974 the UN General Assembly voted to adopt the Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), UNITAR quickly responded with a research project, multiple publications and conferences, and later by holding diplomatic training seminars for North-South dialogue. A "Project on the Future" of the UN was instituted in addition to the general research programme, to study North-South

relations, the NIEO and alternative energy sources. UNITAR was, during this time, a space of intellectual dialogue crossing East-West and North-South divides, where academic freedom combined with access to public and internal UN meetings and documentation. Hundreds of diplomats from across the globe benefitted from some form of UNITAR training during this period.

Paths Not Taken

However, from its beginning UNITAR struggled to secure a dependable financial footing. Structurally dependent on UN Member States' voluntary contributions, which fluctuated in the face of shifting economic and political priorities, UNITAR's Executive Directors needed to maintain a constant fundraising effort. Unable to project its income beyond a few years, UNITAR could only hire personnel on a short-term basis, making long-term strategic planning impossible. Voluntary contributions declined in the 1970s.

By the time **Michel Doo-Kingue of Cameroon** (Term of Office 1983-1992) took up the position of Executive Director, UNITAR had faced many years of financial distress. It was over-extended in its operations, particularly in terms of research and its "Project for the Future" and required almost annual bailouts from the General Assembly budget. Doo-Kingue faced the task of reducing UNITAR's operations and streamlining its programmes. In 1986, the General Assembly took the decision to refocus UNITAR's activities towards training in international cooperation and multilateral diplomacy. The training department was now generating more of an income by charging governments a fee. Joint training programmes were also instituted with other agencies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO), as well as with the *Institut international d'administration publique* (IIAP) in Paris. On the research side, the budget was constricted,

and the research agenda turned towards more immediate practical outputs, such as the evaluation of development programmes.

Crisis

The crisis remained serious. The 1980s were particularly difficult for UNITAR. It had multiple publications committed to developing countries, but not all of them met standards of excellence. Its diplomatic training programmes seemed outdated, as many new members of the UN had been independent for 30 years and were mostly now organizing their diplomats' training through national institutions. Many developed countries were cutting off or greatly reducing their voluntary financial contributions.

In this volatile context, the Group of 77 had maintained its unwavering support for the Institute. On the crest of this support UNITAR could survive the tumult, even with low financial means. Repeated attempts at streamlining activities and achieving financial sustainability were not enough to maintain sufficient support from donor countries. In 1988, the decision was reached to sell the UNITAR building in New York in order to pay its debts. The future hung in the balance.

Finally, an independent report was commissioned by the General Assembly to help decide UNITAR's fate. Its author, Francis Blanchard, former Director General of the International Labor Office, concluded that the Institute's mandate remained relevant, advocating its reform and resumption of activities. He proposed the transfer of UNITAR Headquarters to its European Headquarters in Geneva, at the time directed by **Marcel Boisard** of Switzerland (who later became Executive Director, Term of Office 1992-2007). The Institute's drastic restructuring also followed the strategy adopted earlier by its Geneva office, namely, to extend programmes to other thematic areas in economic and social development, as mandated by its Statutes.



Research activities, too, were greatly reduced (except research on and for training), and focus shifted primarily on more decentralized and ad hoc training. New courses and workshops on environmental issues, development economics and human rights became prevalent, were shorter, their

locations more diverse, and their funding more tightly controlled.

New Headquarters, New Life

On 1 July 1993, UNITAR headquarters was transferred from New York to Geneva, following a General Assembly resolution (A/Res/47/227). This move marked a kind of rebirth for UNITAR.

The new Headquarters could build on the earlier successes of two major programmes which had been launched in the mid-80s, simultaneously, by the then European Office in Geneva. The first, in collaboration with the World Bank, aimed at training for civil servants from least developed countries in external debt management and negotiations at the Paris Club. This was subsequently the first distance learning UNITAR course, made available by its Debt and Financial Management Programme.

The second, in collaboration with UNEP and the Swiss Federal Polytechnic in Lausanne (EPFL), trained developing country specialists in the use and applications of remote sensing

and geographic information systems for environmental and natural resource management. Programme partners included world-class specialists at UNEP's Global Resource Information Database and the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration, who helped design innovative training modules that paved the way for various future operations in the field of the environment and resource management (including UNOSAT, nowadays called the UN Satellite Centre). An implicit *modus operandi* was developed, namely that once initial needs were addressed UNITAR would transfer its data, if possible, to institutions in developing countries.

UNITAR started the first Fellowship Programme in Peacemaking and Preventive Diplomacy in 1993 in Austria, where it was subsequently held for its first eight years, supported by the Austrian Government. The venue then moved to Norway, with support from the Norwegian government. 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of the programme, referred to as "the gold standard" in providing dedicated training in conflict prevention and analysis, negotiation, mediation and reconciliation for UN Headquarters, agency and peace mission staff, as well as regional organization representatives and mid- and senior-level diplomats from around the world.

High-level Seminars were also organized by the Programme in Switzerland in 1998 and 1999 for Directors and Assistant Secretaries-General of the UN Department for Political Affairs, together with selected senior scholars, on specific topics of interest to the Department's work ("autonomy" and "democratization" respectively) in order to inform UN practice with the latest knowledge in these fields. These evolved into an annual Seminar for Special and Personal Representatives and Envoys of the UN Secretary-General, organized since 2001.

Revival and Strengthening of Programmes

In 1996 a UNITAR Office was formally reopened in New York, at the service of the Permanent Representations and focused largely on diplomatic training and liaison with the General Secretariat. It soon reversed the decline of earlier years, expanding both the number and the thematic range of programmes for delegates in New York. It is now a well-established resource for delegates at UN Headquarters, reaching some 7,000 participants in 2022 alone.

While diplomatic training continued in improved forms, including the programme conducted in The Hague in cooperation with the United Nations Legal Office and the Academy of International Law, training in support of United Nations programmes, in collaboration with numerous specialized agencies, also developed rapidly in the 1990s. First, following the 1992 Earth Summit and subsequent negotiations, initiatives were taken for training in the implementation of the UN Framework Conventions on Climate Change then, briefly, the Convention to Combat Desertification. Other programmes focused on other environmental conventions, in particular those concerning potentially toxic products (Conventions of Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm, etc.).

Meanwhile a 10-year series of conferences, held by UNITAR in partnership with Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies and the Japan Institute of International Affairs, focused on lessons learned from UN peacekeeping operations, publishing some seven volumes that became among the first references in the field.

Finally, a series of training courses was launched for sub-national entities and local governments within the framework of decentralized cooperation. It had the originality of being both a North-South and South-South collaboration in support of the Millennium Development Goals. Regions or cities whose successes were recognized in specific areas shared experiences with others, on issues like health, education, transportation, infrastructure, traffic, water, waste, municipal management, information and communication technologies, amongst others. UNITAR, with the support of donors, developed a methodology called City-Share that consists of various processes of self-assessment, distillation and exchange of knowledge and good practices in order to improve the performance of an organization at the local level.



To ensure the continuity of such cooperative efforts, in 2003 a new project to establish decentralized training centres was launched. The CIFAL model (International Training Centre for Authorities and Leaders) was implemented with the establishment of new centres in China (Shanghai), Malaysia (Kuala-Lumpur), Spain (Barcelona), France (Divonne-les-Bains), and Brazil (Curitiba), always in partnership

with a local institutional host. From five centres two decades ago, today the CIFAL Global Network comprises 32 centres around the world and annually trains more than 80,000 learners on a wide range of issues and in support of the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Further, as part of the decentralized cooperation impetus at UNITAR, a project office was established in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in 2006. Its mission is to provide training for civil servants and civil society beneficiaries from the Niger Delta Region and from Nigeria’s neighbouring countries in West Africa. This project office was established with the support of the private sector and continues to operate with a particular focus on African youth and African women empowerment.

In accordance with the decision of the General Assembly, all the above-mentioned programmes were financed (without any subsidies from the regular UN budget) by national cooperation agencies of industrialized countries, by “public-private-partnerships” or, sometimes, by the beneficiaries themselves. Nonetheless the general budget increased substantially and UNITAR established itself as a self-funded, credible training agency in multilateral diplomacy and economic development: “The diamond in the crown of the United Nations,” as described by diplomat.

In 2003, following three years of research and a pilot phase, UNITAR established its first office in Asia in the city of Hiroshima, the only UN presence in that symbolic city. Marking this year its 20th anniversary, the Hiroshima Office has built a stellar reputation for the quality and depth of its training, the power of its unique location, and its close ties to the community. Its programmes tend to build on what Hiroshima represents: peace, prosperity and resilience.



A large proportion of beneficiaries come from countries in special situations such as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Least Developed Countries (LLDCs), and Small

Island Development States (SIDS) and conflict/post conflict countries. Women and youth are priority groups. Alongside tested and tried adult learning methodologies improved over the years, the Hiroshima Office continues to explore and adopt new approaches, including low-tech and high-tech tools to reach those left behind and to deepen the impact of learning. Its current portfolio covers post-conflict reconstruction, digital upskilling, entrepreneurship, private sector development, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, disaster risk reduction, and youth and women leadership. Programmes have continued to proliferate, reaching more than 60,000 learners around the world over the last two decades.

Tested Anew



The consolidation of UNITAR's training programmes continued under **Carlos Lopes** of Guinea Bissau (Term of Office 2007-2012). By 2012 the Institute was reaching about 65,000 participants from 186 countries through various workshops, courses, and e-learning initiatives.

Sustainable development became a key focus area for UNITAR, and the climate change programmes expanded further, with training workshops and technical assistance to support the implementation of climate change commitments.

Yet another programme focused on members of military, police and civilians who could potentially contribute to UN peacekeeping operations, initially offered in the form of distance learning.

South-South cooperation was actively sought and UNITAR created a special research track on multilateralism, and enhanced partnerships with institutions from the Global South to enable the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Additionally strategic partnerships with the UN research and training community were actively developed, as were partnerships for the Geneva Lecture Series with the United Nations Office at Geneva, with the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) to expand UNOSAT and with EPFL for key methodological work on cities and urban development through a large expansion of CIFAL centres.



Innovative approaches to training and use of technology, including e-learning platforms, to reach a wider audience were expanded, and the UNITAR budget and staff increased significantly, attaining an average of \$20 million annually.



In September 2012, **Sally Fegan-Wyles** of Ireland (Term of Office 2012-2015) was appointed Acting Head, Executive Director of UNITAR. Initially, she was tasked to lead the merger of seven UN research and training institutes, including UNITAR, to create one larger institute which would offer comprehensive learning solutions to broad audiences. To this task, she brought her previous experience of leading a team to establish a single UN entity focusing on gender equality and empowerment of women, UN

Women, from various units and departments. However, many UN Member States were not in favour of such a merger and ultimately due to a lack of political consensus the initiative was not pursued further.

In 2013, UNITAR marked its 50th anniversary, commemorated by the signing of a Framework of Cooperation between UNITAR and the G77 and China, Geneva Chapter. Within this framework, the G77 expressed its need for increased support from UNITAR in strengthening the capacities of its member nations. In response, UNITAR reaffirmed its unwavering commitment to assist G77 countries by enhancing their capacities in areas that are relevant to the United Nations.



A New Era



By the time **Nikhil Seth** of India (Term of Office 2015 – Present) joined UNITAR as Executive Director in early October 2015, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda had just been adopted in the UN General Assembly — a truly inclusive process which had enjoyed substantial multi stakeholder consensus. Nikhil Seth was one of the architects of the 2030 Agenda in his role as Director of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, UN Division for Sustainable Development. This

overarching agenda consequently became the cornerstone of UNITAR’s own strategic framework. The programmatic work of UNITAR was organized under the pillars of Peace, People, Planet and Prosperity. SDG learning, UNOSAT and diplomatic training were further strengthened with the full and enthusiastic support of the Board of Trustees.

The COVID-19 crisis spurred the technological shift in the Institute. Face-to-face training was increasingly replaced by online learning, leading to an exponential increase in the number of learners. Financially the Institute continued to grow at a robust 12 per cent per year. A new office was opened in Bonn, Germany, and the number of CIFAL centres further increased from 14 to 32, spanning all continents. Partnerships with the private sector and academia were strengthened, leading to networks of universities - brought together in coalitions - with a focus on multidisciplinary learning. Learners were mostly in developing countries and gender parity was achieved in the numbers of learners.



UNITAR celebrates its 60th anniversary with the resolve to continue serving its many constituencies worldwide, with special attention to the most distant and remote learners. Thematically, UNITAR will continue to prioritize technology, science, and innovation to bolster its key areas of focus: Peace, People, Planet, and Prosperity pillars, as well as SDG learning, UNOSAT and diplomatic training. Finally, it will strive to keep learning from the past, while resolutely looking forward towards the future.

Throughout 60 years, UNITAR has stood at the forefront of training and capacity development for UN Member States, consistently adapting to meet their evolving needs and priorities. It has weathered the winds of global change, recovering from the threat of closure in the 1980s to establish itself as a dependable reference and resource for the international community. The Institute today represents a beacon of support, empowering individuals to acquire new skills and knowledge. UNITAR wholeheartedly embraces the transformative power of training and continuous learning, firmly believing in its ability to transform people's minds and create change.

Sixty years of enabling positive change.