



Source: Mayor Zaragoza, 16 March 1999, Wikimedia, photographer Alexandre Devil

MAYOR ZARAGOZA, Federico

Spanish politician and eighth Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1987-1999

By **Chloé Maurel** · Version 28 June 2019

Was born 27 January 1934 in Barcelona and died 19 December 2024 in Madrid, Spain. He was the son of Federico Mayor, entrepreneur, and Juana Zaragoza. On 9 November 1956 he married María Ángeles Menéndez, pharmacist, with whom he had one daughter and two sons.

Biography

Born in Catalonia in 1934, Mayor grew up during Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975). He studied pharmacy at the Complutense University of Madrid, where he earned an undergraduate degree in 1956 and a doctorate in 1958, in both cases with special distinction. In 1963 he became one of the youngest scientists in Spain to occupy a university chair as professor of biochemistry in the Faculty of Pharmacy of the University of Granada (until 1973). As a scientist he travelled to exchange ideas with colleagues, with travelling becoming one of his life's pleasures. In 1966-1967 he was a visiting professor and researcher at Trinity College in Oxford, United Kingdom (UK). Upon returning to Spain he became Director of the interdisciplinary Department of Pharmacy and Natural Sciences at the University of Granada, where he launched the National Plan for the Prevention of Mental Retardation aimed at reducing the prevalence of mental handicaps in Spanish children. He helped to introduce the academic teaching of molecular pathology and perinatal biochemistry and to popularize these studies. Between 1968 and 1972 he also served as Rector of the University of Granada: 'my appointment as university rector ... was a surprise to all, including

myself' (Mayor 2018: 231). As Rector he developed a new campus and introduced a modern management system. In 1973 he became professor of biochemistry at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, where he headed the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. He became the founder and first Director (1975-1978) of the Centre of Molecular Biology, named after Nobel Prize winner Severo Ochoa, of the Spanish High Council for Scientific Research.

Mayor's political career began in 1974-1975, when he served as Under-Secretary at the Ministry for Education and Science. While democracy was being re-established in Spain after Franco's death in 1975, he chaired the Advisory Committee for Scientific and Technical Research at the Prime Minister's Office (from 1974 to 1978). In 1977 he was elected as a Member of Parliament for the Union of the Democratic Centre and became Chair of the Parliamentary Commission for Education and Science, where he promoted the study of problems of children with mental and physical disabilities. Mayor's cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began in 1975 when he became a member of UNESCO's Advisory Committee of CEPES, the European Centre for Higher Education, and then a member of UNESCO's Advisory Committee for Scientific Research and Human Needs (1976-1977). Mayor, who sought an international career, gave up his parliamentary position in 1978 to become Deputy Director-General of UNESCO, which was headed by Amadou M'Bow from Senegal, and focused on the promotion of non-Western cultures and the restitution of African artistic pieces conserved in European museums. While the United States (US) was becoming critical of UNESCO, the Soviet Union sought to gain more influence. Mayor (2018: 232-233), who felt sympathy for Soviet dissidents, was frequently, but unsuccessfully, approached by the Soviet delegation to support its views. In 1980 Mayor became the Representative of the UNESCO Director-General on the Board of the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan. The following year he became a member of the Club of Rome, which is a group of scientists, economists, businessmen and statesmen reflecting on the future of human society. That year he gave up his UNESCO position and returned to Spain to serve again as Minister for Education and Science, which lasted until 1982. Between 1983 and 1987 he was Director of the Institute of the Sciences of Man in Madrid as well as Scientific Chairman of the Severo Ochoa Centre of Molecular Biology. He supervised theses and published articles aimed at scientific audiences and the general public as well as poetry. In early 1987 he was elected as a Member of the European Parliament, but gave up this position when he was elected as UNESCO's Director-General later that year. His scientific background and former position at UNESCO were helpful for his election, as well as the sudden replacement of the 'Eastern' candidate, Professor Abdus Sallam from Pakistan, by Pakistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sahabzada Yaqub Khan. Khan, however, withdrew his candidacy after he failed to win sufficient support in two rounds of voting. M'Bow made an unexpected bid for an unprecedented third term and received 21 votes in the fourth round. Mayor, who had the official support of most European and Latin American states and Japan as well as the unofficial backing of the US and the UK, received 19 votes. The fifth round between the two candidates resulted in a filibuster by M'Bow's African supporters in order to avoid a vote on Mayor, but, after Senegal had withdrawn M'Bow's name, Mayor was the winner, even if M'Bow still received 20 votes. Mayor declared that, as a Spanish citizen, he was sensitive to Third World peoples and, like his predecessor, willing to help them.

On 15 November 1987 Mayor succeeded M'Bow as Director-General. This was a difficult period for UNESCO, as the US, followed by the UK and Singapore, had withdrawn from the organization in 1984-1985 in protest of its politicization, bureaucratization and high expense. Mayor wanted UNESCO to be 'the spearhead of democracy in the world'. Claiming that 'our model of development' was a big failure he wished UNESCO to contribute to 'the defence of minority cultures'. Shocked by the fact that 'every day 10,000 or 15,000 children die of hunger in the streets' he sought a more efficient organization, able to fight misery, as he declared later (*Le Figaro*, 11 March 1994). The organization's budget was greatly diminished due to the withdrawals. In 1988 the UNESCO Staff Association severely criticized Mayor's policy of layoffs and rationalization in its bulletin *Opinion*, noting 'with dismay that the most basic rules for good staff management are ignored and that the security of employment of the staff as a whole is put in danger'. The Association firmly opposed 'any policy of continuous suppression of

occupied posts' (*Opinion*, 12 July 1988, in CAB.1/60) and lodged a complaint with the International Labour Organization's Administrative Tribunal, which in July 1988 condemned UNESCO with a fine of 12,000 Swiss francs and instructed the organization to cancel the layoffs (*Opinion*, 20 July 1988).

Mayor found it difficult to defuse the crisis. He immediately made efforts to decentralize the administration, resulting in the creation of the bureau for coordination of field units in 1989, which was invested with responsibility for studying the specific situation of each field unit. He furthermore reinforced the Participation Programme, a complement to UNESCO's regular activities, with the objective of using half of the budget for staff costs and the other half for special projects. He tried to reduce the number of meetings and, to recruit the best staff, modify the hierarchical nature of the posts. In order to transfer more staff members internally, he demanded a stricter system of evaluation for UNESCO personnel. 'I have introduced chaos with my management style', he recognized (Gadfly 1990), but he hoped to break the rigid bureaucracy and hierarchy to spur more dynamism in the organization. He also promoted the concept of transparency, when attempting to 'eliminate all the bureaucracy and influence of the big economic powers that are against a democratic way of driving the world in the international arena' (Maurel 2019). In 1990-1991 he succeeded in obtaining more extra-budgetary resources for UNESCO by making the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) the principal funding source of all extra-budgetary activities (almost 40 per cent). To leverage resources from other organizations he concluded partnerships with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and several non-governmental organizations. In March 1990 he defended himself against severe criticisms by the staff association concerning the suppression of 200 posts: 'I made these decisions myself, but after having many consultations inside and outside the Organization'. He confirmed that he respected 'principles of modern management' and argued that his action had enabled UNESCO to save nearly ten million US dollars for the 200 posts affected (1987-2005 PHE-98/WS: Presse 1990: box 111). This did not convince the staff association, which in May firmly opposed 'measures taken in order to rationalize the operation of the Organization'. The association spoke about short-term policy making focused on the reduction of personnel costs and complained that 'at UNESCO, there is neither employment security, nor unemployment allowance, nor social advantages', while the place of women in the organization was inferior (letter dated 29 May 1991, in CAB.1/60). Mayor was also criticized for travelling abroad too much (during his first term in office he met with 110 heads of state), but he explained that this was necessary to maintain good relations with member states and also to gain re-adhesion of the states that had withdrawn. Despite the staff association's firm opposition, he continued to restructure UNESCO in order to cut costs. However, the budget for 1992-1993 (445 million dollars) was only slightly less than that for the previous biennium. The Director-General himself used 7.7 per cent of this budget (which was criticized as too costly), culture 15 per cent, science 28 per cent (an important part, with Mayor being a scientist himself) and education 39 per cent. Japan had become the most important contributing state since the withdrawal of the US and the UK, financing 11 per cent of the total budget, with France contributing 6 per cent (Navarre 1991). Japanese UNESCO clubs were very active, yet the Japanese government demanded more cuts in the budget. Japan became influential in UNESCO's actions, including creating a UNESCO Prize for the promotion of the arts, and funded four million dollars for the protection of the temples of Angkor in Cambodia.

Mayor's Director-Generalship coincided with the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the East-West conflict which had hindered UNESCO's activities. Nevertheless, Mayor was aware that the Cold War's end did not nullify conflicts in the world, especially in the former Soviet sphere of influence. The new situation, however, allowed him more room to manoeuvre. UNESCO engaged in the issue of climate change, organizing the second World Climate Conference in Geneva in October-November 1990 along with the World Meteorological Organization, the United Nations Environmental Programme and the International Council for Science. UNESCO called for the adoption of a framework treaty on climate change and the necessary protocols. Mayor engaged in a contribution (the programme Man and

Biosphere, meant to safeguard natural ecosystems) to the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which resulted in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and opened the Framework Convention on Climate Change for signature.

To promote basic education UNESCO organized the International Literacy Year (1990). Mayor advocated a long-term education action and endorsed UNESCO's Open Learning System, initiated by French scientist Michel Serres. The World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990, convened by UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and the IBRD, expressed the aim of Education For All and the idea 'that access to education is not only a moral imperative but also a factor of efficiency in terms of investment for development'. Mayor encouraged the establishment of (in total 118) national committees for literacy and in 1992 UNESCO and UNICEF launched a special initiative to promote Basic Education For All in the nine largest developing countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan). UNESCO led different projects of the major programme Towards Lifelong Education For All, including scientific, technical and vocational education for girls in Africa and the UNEVOC project, which promotes learning for the world of work. However, due to insufficient resources and support, UNESCO did not achieve the goals it had set for Education For All in 2000. Mayor regarded higher education projects and partnerships between universities a priority. Some 5,000 university teachers and young researchers were trained in the frame of Science for Progress and the Environment in 1990-1991, facilitating the participation of developing country experts in international meetings. Mayor allocated several funds to activities in the field of life sciences, such as the Molecular and Cell Biology Network that encompassed 20 countries and eight research projects in 1990-1991. The UNITWIN project for twinning universities aimed at strengthening inter-university cooperation. Agreements for establishing 20 so-called UNESCO chairs were signed in 16 countries in 1992-1993. UNESCO also organized symposia on science and technology and environmental issues in Eastern European countries, in order to contribute to their transition to democracy. In 1993 Mayor was awarded the Press Freedom Prize for advancing the cause of freedom of expression in Central and Eastern Europe. He furthermore initiated public-private partnerships. UNESCO participated in the design of the Bolivar programme, which sought to establish cooperative ties between public research and the private productive and services sectors in Latin America, and he created the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Awards (1997), which aimed to improve women's participation in science. Staff members believed that Mayor initiated too many projects, which also suffered from a lack of resources after a while, and his cooperation with the private sector was criticized, because private firms' profits are not always compatible with UNESCO's aims of human rights, peace, development, culture and Education For All (Maurel 2013).

UNESCO's most ambitious project since the rescue of the Egyptian Abu Simbel temples in the 1960s was the Silk Roads Project, launched in 1988. This ten-year undertaking organized expeditions retracing, by land and by sea, some of these routes, with the participation of experts from all the countries involved. However, it provoked political tensions between Japan and China, with Japan taking umbrage with poor treatment of Japanese journalists by China in 1990. The expedition in China had to be postponed and the tensions reported in the media affected and weakened Mayor's position as Director-General. Mayor, a poet himself, emphasized culture and launched the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997), the project for the revival of the ancient library of Alexandria (finished in 2002), the Common Market of Knowledge (1992) and the World Day for Cultural Development (1993). In 1992 he established the World Commission on Culture and Development, chaired by former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuellar, to analyse the links between cultures, cultural development, education and cultural exchanges. In 1993 UNESCO prepared the Memory of the World Programme aimed at safeguarding the endangered world documentary heritage. In the field of cultural heritage UNESCO pursued the Moenjodaro (Pakistan) International Safeguarding Campaign of 1974 (finished in 1997) and operations to protect the ancient cities of Angkor in Cambodia (supported by Japan) and Fez in Morocco. UNESCO's 1972 List of World

Heritage in Danger (parallel to the List of World Heritage) aimed to restore world heritage in danger, with in 1993 136 states party to the 1972 World Heritage Convention and 411 entries on the World Heritage List. Mayor cultivated the concept of 'intangible heritage' (followed by the 2003 Convention of Intangible Cultural Heritage) and to protect minority cultures and languages he arranged the publication of a collection of Urdu stories from India and Pakistan (1997). In that year UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organization organized the World Forum on the Protection of Folklore in Thailand, with the Harare Declaration focusing on African cultures. The *World Heritage Review*, a quarterly World Heritage Centre publication on listed and natural sites, was launched in 1998 and in 1999, encouraged by Mayor, the UN adopted the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace.

UNESCO's General Conference re-elected Mayor in November 1993. While 86 votes were needed to be re-elected, he obtained 168 out of the 175 cast, which illustrated his popularity among the member states at the time. In his words of gratitude he (1993) stressed that he had induced UNESCO 'in a process of renewal' and 'of modernization'. As an active and passionate person Mayor was always interested in new ideas and projects and obsessed by time: 'we do not know the price of each day or of each hour, and time, slipping through our fingers, erodes our prints, our sensitivity, and our expectations'. Being eager to contribute 'to alleviate and eliminate the chronic poverty and deprivation in which some one third of the world's 5.3 billion inhabitants live' (UNESCO 1993), he promoted 'invention, freedom of spirit, and diversity' and initiated numerous projects in many directions. One of his staff members described him as enthusiastic, full of new ideas and projects, but also versatile and changing his priorities frequently (*Le Monde*, 9 November 1993). Mayor endeavoured to give UNESCO more visibility by participating in the UN world conferences. The organization contributed to the preparation of the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights by sponsoring several meetings and seminars and co-organized the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) and the UN Year for Tolerance (1995). In 1995 Mayor also constituted the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, chaired by former President of the European Commission Jacques Delors.

During the 1990s Mayor put emphasis on scientific action, with UNESCO handling programmes such as the International Geoscience Programme, the International Hydrological Programme (on water resources), the International Oceanographic Programme and the Management of Social Transformations Programme. With other organizations UNESCO was involved in the International Geosphere/Biosphere Programme, the World Climate Programme and the Inter-Agency Climate Agenda. UNESCO's networks of biosphere (on protected areas) developed further during the 1990s and its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission intensified its action, with 1998 becoming the International Year of the Ocean. Mayor continued the development of UNESCO chairs in universities. Between 1991 and 1997 35 chairs were established in the fields of engineering and technology. In 1992 UNESCO launched the international programme for the development of communications, while Mayor promoted the new field of informatics through the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme, which trained 1800 information specialists, trainers and users worldwide. In 1993 the International Bioethics Committee was created, chaired by French politician Noëlle Lenoir and composed of 40 specialists. Mayor encouraged the establishment of national ethics committees and UNESCO adopted in November 1997 the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights.

UNESCO also committed itself against racism and discrimination and continued to raise awareness of the problem of South African apartheid. Mayor supported promoting peace in the Near East by awarding the UNESCO Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize to Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993 for the agreement between the Palestinians and Israel. In 1996 UNESCO launched a programme of educational assistance to Palestinian people living in the occupied territories or as refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Given the war in former-Yugoslavia, UNESCO set up a coordinated extrabudgetary funding programme for educational reconstruction and rehabilitation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to its two education centres for Bosnian

refugees in Slovenia and Croatia. In 1997 Mayor made Kim Phuc Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO. She was one of the running children hurt by napalm during the Vietnam War on the widely-distributed 1972 photograph by Nick Ut.

When UNESCO's General Conference met in October 1999 to elect a new Director-General, staff members were on strike for higher salaries. The organization was assessed as an organization with a multitude of programmes, but without funds to make them effective. Mayor was criticized for having appointed numerous friends, often neglecting the official procedures. He had opened too many field offices which, however, had to find their own sponsors. Staff members felt they had 'esoteric work but without a client or a customer' (Singh 2011: 39) and Mayor had not succeeded in solving UNESCO's financial problems. On 15 November 1999 he was succeeded by Koichiro Matsuura from Japan. After his time at UNESCO Mayor remained active. In 2000 he founded and chaired the Foundation for a Culture of Peace, which defends similar causes as UNESCO. In 2002 he chaired the European Research Council Expert Group that aimed at intensifying research competitiveness of the European Union and, together with former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and others, he initiated the Centre Humanism, Management and Globalization in Montreal, Canada which aims at humanizing the globalization process. In 2005 he became co-President of the UN High Level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations, an attempt at a cultural and humanist response to the 9-11 attacks in the US in 2001. He is Honorary President of the International Commission against the Death Penalty, which promotes universal abolition. Mayor was awarded the Catalanian Creu de Sant Jordi Prize in 2005 and is an honorary member of several scientific societies.

March 2025: date of death added

Archives

Files of F. Mayor in UNESCO Archives, Paris, see <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/search/9707c8b6-e10a-48f7-87e4-2bd65663786b>: CAB.1/56 to CAB.1/104 and 1987-2005 PHE-98/WS: Presse 1990: boxes 111-112

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(all websites accessed on 28 May 2019)

How to cite

Chloé Maurel, 'Mayor Zaragoza, Federico' in *IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, edited by Bob Reinalda, Kent J. Kille and Jaci L. Eisenberg.
<https://sandbox.zenodo.org/records/506535> (sandbox preview)

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