

CULTURE: A PATH TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?



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CIDOB REPORT

06- 2020

How does culture matter to the United Nations in the twenty-first century? What is its role in creating a more sustainable future, strengthening the UN system and renewing the collective commitment to multilateralism? To equip the UN to better tackle the global challenges laid out in the 2030 Agenda and improve its integration, Secretary-General António Guterres has launched reforms in three areas: Peace and Security, Development, and Management. Culture is barely mentioned in the reform plans, but it can contribute to effective innovations in all these areas. The epochal transformations we face today call for renewed investment in UN programmes and policies in the areas of cultural heritage and intercultural dialogue, especially where they relate to the UN's peace and sustainable development agendas.

Peace: Managing cultural diversity in a globally interconnected world

The contribution of cultural policies and programmes to UN peacebuilding has gained new relevance since Secretary-General Guterres re-established the pursuit of peace as the organisation's primary objective. This particularly applies to the current reform of the UN peace and security pillar, which places preventive diplomacy and action at the forefront of peacebuilding. To overcome the narrow focus of peacebuilding on post-conflict intervention, a new guiding concept of "sustaining peace" was adopted in 2016 that deepens and widens the UN peace agenda to take in prevention, root causes, mediation, reconciliation, reconstruction and development (Resolution 70/262). This multifaceted approach creates stronger linkages between peace, sustainable development and human rights, and fosters new partnerships across the peace efforts of different UN entities and offices (see Bargués in this volume).

The reframing of the scope and methodology of UN peacebuilding and emphasis on prevention have created multiple entry points for culture. Seen from a longer-term perspective the holistic vision of sustaining peace strongly resonates with the earlier notion of a “culture of peace” introduced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1989, which addresses the deep roots of conflict by building on UNESCO’s foundational commitment to nurture people’s defences of peace through transformative education, science and culture. The culture of peace approach gained ground within the broader UN system from the late 1990s onwards through the International Year for the Culture of Peace (2000) and the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence (2001–2010). Defined as a “set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups, and nations” (Resolutions 52/13), the culture of peace places intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity at the core

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of peacebuilding, alongside the imperatives of human rights, democratic participation and sustainable development. In today’s globally interconnected world a culturally sensitive approach of this sort is fundamental to sustaining peace.

The recent UN sustaining peace agenda has paved the way for greater recognition of contributions in the areas of intercultural dialogue and cultural heritage (tangible and intangible). Resolution 2347 on the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict adopted by the Security Council in 2017 is one example, recognising UNESCO’s efforts to protect cultural

heritage as an integral part of international security and peacebuilding. Another initiative that stands out is “Revive the Spirit of Mosul”,¹ the UNESCO flagship project launched in 2018 to contribute to Iraq’s reconstruction and reconciliation between communities through rebuilding cultural heritage sites and revitalising educational and cultural institutions. Mosul, one of the world’s oldest cities and a cultural melting pot, has been a site of militarised conflict since 2003, enduring occupation by the Islamic State/Daesh group and serving as its capital from 2014 to 2017. Years of war and extremist ter-

1. <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/baghdad/revivemosul>

rorism have left the city and its ancient cultural and religious heritage in ruins, and inflicted immense violence and trauma on the population. UNESCO's initiative is the first large-scale attempt to reconstruct and protect the city's heritage, empower its population and promote an inclusive and cohesive society.

However, initiatives like these remain the exception. There is still a long way to go until cultural actions and programmes are properly integrated into UN peacebuilding. Generally speaking, the contribution of culture to peace is still an underexplored and underfunded area within the UN. If the reform of the UN peace and security pillar aspires to be comprehensive it needs to address this interlinkage, particularly in the following two areas:

The first concerns the role of cultural actions and strategies in resolving specific localised conflicts and conflict risks. The twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of conflicts driven by ethnic, religious and cultural discourses, ranging from intellectual "culture wars" to ethnic cleansing, as well as other non-traditional threats motivated by identity politics (see Bourekba in this volume). These are particularly amenable to cultural interventions that aim to provide foundations for local dialogue and improved institutions and group relations. Examples and recommendations can be found in the UNESCO report *The Long Walk of Peace: Towards a Culture of Prevention* (2018), which analyses the organisation's work in the area of education and culture in the context of the broader sustaining peace agenda. An area of particular relevance for local conflict resolution highlighted by the report is how UNESCO's culture of peace approach can contribute to fostering broad local ownership of peace, that is, within national governments and institutions, as well as in civil society. Educational and creative methodologies for cultural capacity building and dialogue can help engage stakeholders from across different social and political groups, identifying and mediating between their diverging needs, values, identities and cultural imperatives. Cultural methodologies like these are fundamental to creating long-term, sustainable peace by engaging the different sectors and groups in a society. They should be made an integral part of UN preventive diplomacy efforts.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT AREA IN WHICH INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE CAN CONTRIBUTE TO UN PEACEBUILDING IS AT THE MACRO-LEVEL OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE FOR PEACE.

Another important area in which intercultural dialogue can contribute to UN peacebuilding is at the macro-level of global governance for peace. As the planned revisions to the UN security pillar stress, one of the major challeng-

es to sustaining peace in today's world are the growing geopolitical divisions that prevent the settlement of disputes and wars (UN, 2020). These divisions no longer run merely along the well-known fault lines of the "West versus the rest" and "Global North versus Global South". They now include numerous divergences between states along identity lines (religious, cultural and ethnic) that are fuelled by isolationist and populist discourses that consider that global trade and citizenship are incompatible with national identities and undermine democratic values. The result is a decline in countries' commitment to strategic cooperation and a rules-based global order. In his address to the General Assembly on September 25th 2018, Guterres described the situation as "a bad case of trust deficit disorder" that poses a severe challenge to our collective ability to manage risk.

IF THE FUTURE ENVISIONED IN THE AGENDA 2030 IS TO BECOME A REALITY, CULTURE NEEDS TO BE INCLUDED IN MORE GENERAL SUSTAINABILITY MODELS WHOSE CONCERNS ARE PRIMARILY ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL.

Renewed investment in curated, systematic intercultural dialogue between representatives of states within the UN could contribute to reducing deficits in trust and improve relations between states. The final two years of the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013–2022)² could be used as a platform to openly address the issue and promote a culture of dialogue and multilateral collaboration. While similar efforts were made with the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001) and the creation of the Alliance of Civilizations (2005), these focused on older fault lines, such as the cultural-religious differences between the West and Islam. Today, we need to reflect

and tackle more complex divisions that sit at the intersection of culture and politics and challenge the very foundations of multilateralism.

Development: Fostering cultures of transformation

The UN has been at the forefront of debates and policies linking culture and development since the 1980s (Arzipe, 2019). Confronted with the inconsistencies and failures of many economic development programmes, UN entities such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were among the first international organisations to give greater importance to cultural variables in development planning. At the same time, UNESCO in-

2. <https://en.unesco.org/internationaldecaderapprochementofcultures>

vested heavily in linking cultural policy with emerging theories of human and sustainable development through initiatives such as the World Decade for Culture and Development (1987–1997) and the creation of the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) in 1992. These efforts culminated in the publication of the WCCD report *Our Creative Diversity* (1995), which initiated a worldwide conversation on culture and development that led other UN agencies and international actors such as the World Bank and the Global Economic Forum at Davos to take up the issue.

Since the turn of the century, culture's role as an enabler and driver of sustainable socioeconomic development has become widely accepted within the UN. However, a number of UNESCO reports aside, there has been little follow-up on the UN's innovative work on the subject in the 1990s. On the contrary, disengagement from culture is evident within the UN's major development policies (on the latter see Ayuso in this volume). The Millennium Development Goals paid no attention to the cultural dimension of development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) similarly make only weak references to culture with few policy consequences. In the run-up to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, a global multi-stakeholder campaign provided ample research demonstrating the importance of culture in development processes, but UN member states nevertheless decided against including a specific "Culture Goal". Overall, the future of culture in the SDG context over the next decade looks meagre. With only one culture-specific target (SDG 11.4 on safeguarding cultural heritage) few operational programmes will earmark funding for cultural projects and actions. What is more, the transversal mentions of culture in some goals (on education, economic growth, consumption and production, and sustainable cities) provide few incentives for decisive action, as the wording is often vague on how exactly culture can contribute to attaining these goals.

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If the future envisioned in the Agenda 2030 is to become a reality, culture needs to be included in more general sustainability models whose concerns are primarily environmental, economic and social (Duxbury et al., 2017). Most environmental and socioeconomic challenges the world faces today have cultural values and practices at their root. The weak position of culture in UN sustainable development policies has prompted multiple civil society initiatives and other actors to conceptualise and operationalise a place for culture in sustainability. The reform of the UN development pillar should engage with and learn from these initiatives.

An important example of a promising approach to conceptualising the inter-relationship between culture and sustainable development is the much-cited European Union-funded COST Action, Investigating Cultural Sustainability (2011–2015) (Dessin et al., 2015). A particular shortcoming addressed by this initiative is the long-running tension between two competing understandings of culture: the humanistic concept of culture as artistic expression and heritage, and the anthropological concept of culture as a distinctive way of life of a people or society. Confusion between the two understandings has hindered the integration of culture into development policy and planning. By defining three separate approaches to the culture-sustainability nexus, the COST Action has brought some clarity into the debate and facilitated

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the incorporation of culture into development policymaking. It distinguishes between (1) “culture *in* sustainability”, which views culture in the humanistic sense as an autonomous fourth dimension of sustainable development and focuses on the contribution of artistic or cultural activity to sustainability pathways; (2) “culture *for* sustainability”, which stresses the mediating role of culture in the broad humanistic sense (including the culture industries) as a way to drive and enable ecological and socioeconomic sustainability; and (3) “culture *as* sustainability”, which suggests that culture in the anthropological sense, as the values and ideals by which a society envisions its future, encompasses all other dimensions of sustainability and is the key to achieving a developmental paradigm change (this last notion is in line with the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen (2004), which views culture as constitutive for development, rather than just a means towards an end). Since its publication, this tripartite model has gradually found its way into cultural and development policymaking in the EU, where it has helped to better frame and communicate the contribution of cultural actions. The UN is also likely to benefit from this conceptual framework for its policies.

Another example is the range of locally driven initiatives that have made progress in operationalising culture in sustainable development planning. Cities and their local governments have moved to the forefront of these efforts (UNESCO, 2016). The Culture Committee of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the worldwide network of local and regional governments, has become the principal advocate for culture as the fourth dimension of sustainable development and as an enabler of sustainability in other sectors. As a complement to the UN Agenda 21 for Sustainable Development of 1992, it launched the “Agenda 21 for Culture” in 2004 and the follow-up document “Culture21: Actions” in 2015, after the failed campaign to include a culture

goal in the 2030 Agenda. Numerous member cities of UCLG have put in place transversal strategies and policies to implement the Agenda 21 for Culture. The UN can learn a great deal from the experiences and outcomes of these local pilot projects, especially from efforts to localise the SDGs through cultural policies and the creation of culture-related indicators.

At the same time more can be done. For instance, in the face of the climate crisis, the notion of “culture *as* sustainability” remains an underexploited concept that could benefit from investment. Again, UNESCO is one of the few international organisations working in this direction, in this case under the motto “Changing minds, not the climate”. But thus far, UNESCO’s culture-related climate actions and programmes focus largely on heritage safeguarding. Much could be gained from integrating artistic and cultural activities into the organisation’s educational programmes and public awareness-raising about climate change. Art could powerfully illuminate the issue and transform attitudes, behaviours and practices in relation to it (on the need for climate policies to foster behavioural change, see Vandendriessche in this volume). Similarly, creative practices can support our coming to terms with the “new normality” that COVID-19 has brought about by reimagining our future lives in ways that respond to the new sanitary requirements but also capitalise on the opportunity for social innovation.

THE UN’S TRANSITION TOWARDS MORE HOLISTIC PUBLIC POLICY, THROUGH THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY, SHOULD LEAD THE ORGANISATION TO RECOGNISE THAT CULTURE REACHES BEYOND THE NARROWLY DEFINED FIELD OF CULTURAL POLICY.

Management: Towards a more inclusive UN

The UN2020 initiative, a growing civil society network, has campaigned for the UN’s 75th anniversary to be used as an opportunity to make the organisation more inclusive and people-centred. This objective also forms part of Guterres’ reform plans in the Management rubric. Culture has been surprisingly absent from both official UN debates and those in civil society on reforms to make the UN more inclusive of civil society. But cultural policies and programmes can be effective vehicles to open up the UN.

UN cultural policies are among the organisation’s most successful and best-known. The 1972 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is the most widely adopted convention in the history of the UN. The 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage generated so much enthusiasm that it be-

came the most rapidly ratified international convention. The popularity of these and other culture-related UN conventions and policies have also assisted in their ambitious goals for engaging civil society. The Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention prescribes that safeguarding must proceed with the permission, cooperation and substantive decision-making involvement of the relevant communities and practitioners. Similarly, the latest UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) formally recognises engagement with civil society as essential to its implementation. Best practices in civil society engagement generated by UNESCO could be capitalised on and transferred to other UN entities.

However, UNESCO itself should also try to set new standards of openness and engagement. In particular, it should try to change the way cultural diplomacy is currently conducted within and through the organisation. At present UNESCO remains a space primarily for traditional multilateral cultural diplomacy between states. It thereby upholds the primacy of states in international cultural relations and reinforces the unified or static notions of “national culture” that states mobilise in their pursuit of soft power (Figueira, 2015). This mode of operating is fundamentally at odds with the values of cultural diversity and cultural rights the organisation promotes. But its more serious failing is that it ignores the reality of contemporary international cultural relations, in which a diverse array of actors outside of central governments – from independent cultural organisations and actors to local authorities – are the real movers and shakers. UNESCO needs to open up to these actors by initiating a paradigm shift in how it defines and practices cultural diplomacy. Again, cultural policy in the EU might serve as a model for such reforms. In 2016, the EU adopted a new joined strategy of European international cultural relations that moves beyond traditional understandings of cultural diplomacy as national soft power and towards a more bottom-up approach that seeks to limit government involvement in favour of people-to-people cooperation (Isar, 2015). While the EU is itself struggling with the implementation of this ambitious strategy, UNESCO should closely follow its failures and successes.

Conclusion

Culture is at the heart of many of today's epochal transformations and disruptions. Yet, it is often ignored as both cause and solution. The COVID-19 crisis has reminded us of the importance of culture and creativity for society. During lockdown, digital access to cultural content and performances allowed for social participation and contributed to peoples' mental health and well-being. In the restart and recovery phase, investment in cultural

practices, institutions and industries will be key to rebuilding social cohesion and accelerating economic recovery, especially in large cities with substantial culture and tourism industries.

In UNESCO the UN has a designated agency for cultural matters, but there continues to be a need to make the case for culture within the broader UN system. The UN's transition towards more holistic public policy, through the all-encompassing concept of sustainability, should lead the organisation to recognise that culture reaches beyond the narrowly defined field of cultural policy; it should inform and be integrated into all environmental, economic and social policies. Above, I have suggested why and how culture should be more systematically included in the policy areas of peace and development. To facilitate a more transversal approach to culture across the three UN pillars, the organisation can also take some more general measures. Of particular importance would be the promotion of strategic partnerships between UNESCO and the UN's core peace, development and human rights agencies. Further, funding for the production of rigorous research and data on how cultural policies and programmes contribute to the UN's three pillars is sorely needed in order to facilitate informed policymaking, measure progress and promote broader engagements with culture.

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