Culture in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda

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Why Culture is Key to Sustainable Development

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Background Note[1]

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The "one size does not fit all" motto places culture at the centre of context-based approaches to sustainable development and improved governance. In what ways does culture act as an enabler and a driver throughout the sustainable development agenda? How does culture contribute to building capabilities and agency and achieving transformative change? How can culture strengthen the Post-2015 agenda and answer the most pressing challenges of the global community? What are the consequences of a Post-2015 agenda without culture?

Culture in the New International Development Paradigm

Two years before the end of the Millennium Development Goals cycle and as the international community takes stock of its achievements in order to agree on the way towards the post-2015 development agenda, it has been widely agreed that the development approach followed thus far has reached its limits despite the undoubted progress made.

As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has stated, "we cannot continue to burn and consume our way to prosperity"[2] as the world's inequalities continue to increase. Dynamic and unpredictable change has been occurring since 2000, and this requires all of us to renew our commitment to tackling existing and emerging challenges. The Outcome Document of the United Nations Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, "The Future We Want for All," states that transformative change is required and that "business as usual is no longer an option."[3]

The Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, recently declared that "culture is what makes us who we are. It gives us strength; it is a wellspring of innovation and creativity; and it provides answers to many of the challenges we face today… We must do far more to place culture at the heart of the global sustainability agenda… at the global level and on the ground across the world."[4] She also affirmed that, "all cultures are different, but humanity must stand united around human rights and fundamental freedoms."[5]

[1] Prepared by Nao Hayashi, Giovanni Boccardi and Nada Al Hassan

[2] Speech at the 2011 Labour Summit in Cannes, France, on 3 November 2011.

[3] "Realizing the Future We Want for All – Report to the Secretary-General," Outcome Document of the Rio+20 Conference, June 2012, accessible online at http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Post_2015_UNTTreport.pdf

[4] The UNESCO Director-General's keynote address at the opening of the Seventh Annual Blouin Creative Leadership Summit, held at the Metropolitan Club in New York on 21 September 2012: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/single-view/news/director_general_meets_the_secretary_general_of_the_united_nations_and_the_president_of_the_general_assembly_prior_the_67th_session_of_the_general_assembly/

[5] Statement made on the award of an honorary doctorate by Durham University in the UK: "Peace and Sustainability in the 21st Century: UNESCO's Contribution" (29 June 2012), p.8. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002168/216810e.pdf#xml=http://www.unesco.org/ulis/cgi-bin/ulis.pl?database=&set=508501BE_0_121&hits_rec=5&hits_lng=eng

One way of promoting such change is to redefine what we mean by human development. The UNDP Administrator Helen Clark put this clearly when she stated that, "progress needs to be defined and measured in a way which accounts for the broader picture of human development and its context and which emphasizes equity, dignity, happiness and sustainability."[6]

Culture, "regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group,"[7] and understood in the broadest sense, is a critical consideration when defining the constitutive elements of well-being, dignity and sustainable human development, rooting these in local realities and capabilities.

The intrinsic linkages between culture and development have been recognized since the 1960s. However, it has only been comparatively recently that the need to integrate a consideration for culture within development efforts has been reflected in international development policy documents.

While culture was not included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established in the year 2000, the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document adopted by the UN General Assembly[8] acknowledged the world's cultural diversity and recognized that all cultures contribute to the enrichment of humankind. The Outcome Document of the Millennium Development Goals Summit (2010),[9] two Resolutions by the UN General Assembly specifically recognizing the role that culture plays in development (65/166 in 2010[10] and 66/208 in 2011[11]), and numerous regional and international recommendations[12] have called for culture to be mainstreamed into sustainable development policies and have also underlined culture's contribution to the achievement of the MDGs.

A further important milestone was the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 and known as the Rio+20 Conference. The Outcome Document of this Conference, entitled "The Future We Want For All", included a number of significant references to culture.[13]

It recognized, for example, that, "many people, especially the poor, depend directly on ecosystems for their livelihoods, their economic, social and physical well-being, and their cultural heritage" (para. 30) and that "all cultures and civilizations can contribute to sustainable development" (para. 41). It also stressed "the need for the conservation as appropriate of the natural and cultural heritage of human settlements, the revitalization of historic districts, and the rehabilitation of city centres" (para. 134) and emphasized the "intrinsic value of biological diversity, as well as its ecological, genetic, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values" (para. 197).

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[6] Speech at a high-level forum held at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 20 June 2012.

[7] UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001.

[8] http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/PDF/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement

[9] http://www.un.org/en/mdg/summit2010/pdf/mdg%20outcome%20document.pdf

[10] http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/65/166

[11] http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=%20A/RES/66/208

[12] For instance, the "Sao Paolo Declaration on Culture and Sustainability" (April 2012), accessible at http://p2pfoundation.net/S%C3%A3o_Paulo_Declaration_on_Culture_and_Sustainability; "Culture as a Catalyst for Socio-Economic and Political Transformation in Africa: the Kinshasa Declaration of CAMC4" (Fourth Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers of Culture, held from 1 to 2 November 2012), accessible at http://www.awhf.net/?p=818; and "Culture, Societies and Sustainable Development: Framework for Action Adopted by the Third Pan-Africa Cultural Congress (PACC3); the Economic Community of Central African States" (a regional forum recommendation made in November 2012). Many other examples might also be mentioned.

[13] *Op.cit.*, footnote 2 above.

Based on the outcomes of the Rio Conference, the UN issued a report entitled "Realizing the Future We Want for All", which sets out a vision for the post-2015 development agenda[14] based on the three fundamental values of the respect for human rights, equality and sustainability and the four core dimensions of inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability and peace and security.

The document recognizes culture's importance by stating that "communities and individuals must be able to create and practice their own culture and enjoy that of others free from fear. This will require, *inter alia*, respect for cultural diversity, safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, fostering cultural institutions, strengthening cultural and creative industries, and promoting cultural tourism."[15]

Development policy professionals have also acknowledged the importance of culture in their work on the ground. While culture was mentioned in fewer than 30 per cent of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) at country level just five years ago, its importance is now underlined in more than 70 per cent of them. Moreover, the UN Secretary-General's 2011 "Report on Culture and Development" also underscored the work being undertaken on a daily basis by 18 United Nations organizations and agencies that included a culture-sensitive approach to sustainable development.[16]

However, despite these advances, what is still missing is a globally agreed and shared recognition that development programmes and strategies at the global, regional and local levels should integrate culture within their goals, indicators and targets. Without such actions, and the giving of related guidance on human capacity-building, the potential of culture to contribute to sustainable development risks being largely untapped in many regions of the world.

Indeed, one of the identified gaps in the MDGs has been their focus on outputs rather than on processes, what has been described as a concern for the "what" at the expense of the "how". The failure of well-intentioned projects and initiatives aimed at achieving the MDGs has been attributed to the lack of consideration given to the specific settings in which the projects were to be conceived and implemented, or, in other words, to the ways in which such projects and initiatives were likely to be received within the specific contexts for which they were designed. Arguably, a stronger concern for local cultural perspectives could have made such projects more effective and increased local ownership.

Culture: Enabler and Driver of Sustainable Development

How, then, can culture contribute to the core dimensions of sustainable development as defined in the "Realizing the Future We Want for All" report and ignite transformative change?

In its larger anthropological sense, culture is clearly connected to the fundamental question of how to ensure development that is compatible with the physical limits of the environment. If achieving sustainability is first and foremost about making appropriate use of the planet's resources, then culture must be at the centre of development strategies, since cultures frame relationships among people in society and towards the earth and cosmos, express attitudes to

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[14] Accessible at
http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Realizing%20the%20future%20we%20want.pdf
[15] Paragraph 71 etc
[16] Accessible at
http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Brussels/pdf/SG%20Report%20Culture%20and%20Development%20A%2066%20187.pdf

and beliefs in other forms of life, whether animal or vegetable, and condition human behaviour. Indeed, many societies and belief systems regard nature as being in some sense an extension of society, making the culture-sensitive stewardship of the natural environment an integral part of sustainable development.

At a fundamental level, biological and cultural diversity are interdependent. Both cultural diversity and biological diversity have developed over time through a process of mutual adaptation between humans and the environment, and, rather than existing in separate and parallel realms, both interact with and affect one another in complex ways in a sort of co-evolutionary process.

Giving due consideration to culture is also key when it comes to designing and implementing effective development initiatives, regardless of the sector in which these take place. When such initiatives take local conditions and cultures into account, experience shows that they are more likely to result in context-sensitive and equitable outcomes, while at the same time enhancing ownership among target beneficiaries. Integrating a concern for culture into development policies and programmes can thus fundamentally contribute to their effectiveness and sustainability.

The conclusion to be drawn is that a culture-sensitive approach is an essential *enabler* of sustainable development and for this reason should be added to human rights, equality and sustainability[17] as an overarching principle underpinning development policies or programmes. At the same time, culture, when considered as an economic activity that includes heritage, the arts, the creative industries and equitable cultural tourism, has an extraordinary and yet largely untapped role to play in contributing to the various dimensions of sustainable development.

The cultural resources of a community can stimulate or be converted into **inclusive economic development** by promoting that community's unique identity, traditions, and cultural products, generating jobs, revenue and market opportunities and contributing to the reduction of poverty. Indeed, the statistics show that this is one of the fastest-growing sectors of many economies, using materials and resources that are locally available and that by their very nature are accessible to all groups within society,[18] including women and girls, marginalized groups and young people in general. Such opportunities are particularly available for the world's developing regions, which are rich in cultural resources and have large labour forces.

Inclusive social development is an area where the intrinsic value of culture is often acknowledged, with culture being recognized as providing a sense of belonging and of being part of a cohesive community, while at the same time helping people to maintain close links to their roots and to the land, with which many identify, especially indigenous peoples. In addition, safeguarding and respecting cultural diversity helps foster an environment that is conducive to tolerance and mutual understanding and one where minorities are acknowledged and society as a whole is more inclusive, stable and resilient. Culture and heritage are also major sources of learning and inspiration, and they can act as a spring for creativity, which strengthens innovation and entrepreneurship.

Culture also contributes to **environmental sustainability**. Traditional cultural activities, particularly those associated with the care of the land, can help promote more sustainable consumption and production patterns. The World Bank, for example, has identified the conservation of historic cities as an effective strategy in reducing CO2 emissions when compared

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[17] Human rights, equality and sustainability are the three overarching principles for sustainable development that are identified in the UN report "Realizing the Future We Want for All".

[18] Data on the contribution of culture to economic development are available at http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/culture-and-development/

to their replacement by new buildings, both because of the energy embedded in their construction and their intrinsically efficient environmental behaviour. Indeed, local and indigenous knowledge systems and environmental management practices can provide valuable insights that are complementary to state-of-the art scientific knowledge in tackling ecological challenges, preventing the loss of biodiversity, reducing land degradation, mitigating the effects of climate change and supporting resilient communities that are better able to cope with disasters.

With regard to **peace, conflict prevention and reconciliation**, culture-sensitive development that acknowledges diversity and promotes the ability of individuals to participate freely in cultural life and access cultural assets can contribute considerably to the building of a culture of "living together," thus helping to prevent tensions and confrontation. In post-conflict areas or areas that have been hit by disasters, rehabilitating the cultural heritage and encouraging cultural activities can help enable the communities concerned to rebuild their identities and regain a sense of normality, helping them to heal the scars of wars or catastrophes.

One major example of this has been the rehabilitation of the site of Angkor in Cambodia, in which the international community has worked for over twenty years to help reunite a nation torn by the internal and regional conflicts. Cultural programmes can also help foster the appreciation of cultural diversity and the appreciation of the universal element that exists in all cultures, or help people to rediscover the historical interconnections between civilizations, humanizing the other and paving the way towards mutual understanding. Sometimes, culture can also highlight shared values, for example by emphasizing the common links that may exist in conflicting communities with a specific form of heritage, promoting its joint stewardship. This was the case in the rebuilding of the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia Herzegovina, for example.

In these ways and others, culture can be seen as acting as a *driver* of sustainable development. The direct impact of culture-related initiatives in achieving sustainable development, and particularly the MDGs, has been demonstrated by various projects, notably those jointly implemented by different UN agencies and funded under the Thematic Window on Culture and Development of the MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F).[19]

Culture, Diversity and Fundamental Rights

One possible reason why culture has thus far sometimes been excluded from international policies for sustainable development has been the persistence of certain recurrent myths regarding the relationship between culture and development.

It has been suggested that an emphasis on cultural difference and the continuity of traditions could lead to social and political conflicts, be incompatible with human rights, or perpetuate inefficient governance and thus hamper development. It has also been suggested that some cultures may be inherently less likely than others to foster developmental progress, for instance in terms of democracy and economic development.

However, in fact there is no evidence that culture or cultural diversity results in fragmentation or conflict, or that some cultures are incompatible with sustainable development, human rights or good governance. Culture is not synonymous with static traditions that are frozen in time. Instead, the very dynamic nature of culture and cultures, constantly evolving in relation to the

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[19] With a budget of US$95 million and UNESCO acting as convener, eighteen joint programmes have been supported worldwide through an inter-agency initiative. A description of these projects and how they have contributed to the various MDGs is available at http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/achieving-the-millennium-development-goals/mdg-f-culture-and-development/

environment and changing societies, can act as a driving force that enables people to adapt their values and practices and overcome obstacles and limitations. Indeed, there is no such thing as a fixed or homogeneous culture in abstract terms. There is only "someone's culture," or "some people's culture," which in addition can also be a composite of multiple and diverse influences.

Moreover, it should be noted that the possibility of participating in cultural life, of being free to pursue creative activities, and of being able to benefit from the protection of literary or artistic production are fundamental human rights and among those enshrined as such within the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.[20]

From a rights-based perspective, the integration of culture into the post-2015 development agenda is also a means of enabling people to "choose the lives that they value."[21] UNESCO has embedded these principles in its cultural Conventions, adding in its 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, that "no one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor limit their scope."[22]

The need to incorporate a culture-sensitive and rights-based approach to development has also often been advocated by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII),[23] which stresses that the right of indigenous peoples to shape their own courses of development should be respected along with their diversity and uniqueness.[24] Such concepts of development should not only be understood as being concerned with natural-resource management and the use of land and territory, but instead should embrace a holistic approach that includes sustainable economic growth and the affirmation of social, economic and cultural rights. The lands and resources of the world's indigenous peoples should not be reduced merely to economic assets,[25] as these also form the basis of their social and cultural integrity.[26] On the other hand, the lack of reliable statistics on the economies of many indigenous communities, thus failing to recognize the contribution made by the informal economy in many countries, can lead to the side-lining of their livelihoods and their possible threat by the development process.[27]

With respect to **gender equality**, the dynamic and transformative nature of culture should also be promoted, in order to enable women "to find paths through which [they] may view tradition with new eyes, in such a way that it will not violate [their] rights, and restore dignity to… women… [and] change those traditions which diminish [their] dignity."[28] The inclusion of a gender perspective in analyses of the intersections of culture, conflict, communication and technology can also help to accelerate the achievement of sustainable development.

Acknowledging cultural diversity should thus not be understood to imply raising barriers between communities or genders, but on the contrary it should mean promoting the capabilities of individuals, both women and men, to address poverty. The latter should also be thought of

[20] http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx

[21] UNDP Human Development Report (2004), "Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World," p. 6. Accessible online at http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr04_complete.pdf

[22] Accessible at
http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

[23] See desk reviews of national MDGs, Common Country Assessments and UN Development Assistance Framework reports at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/mdgs.html

[24] The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Articles 3 and 32), accessible online at http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

[25] The International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 urges governments to acknowledge indigenous peoples' right of ownership over their traditional lands and the natural resources obtained from them in order to protect their economic, political and spiritual interests.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] UN doc. E/C.19/2004/2

[28] Report of the Special Rapporteur, Farida Shaheed, in the Note by the Secretary-General on cultural rights (A/67/287), August 2012.

not only in terms of material conditions and incomes, but also in terms of capabilities and opportunities, notably with respect to access to culture. Diversity of this sort should aim to allow human beings to live and to be what they choose within an increasingly complex world by guaranteeing access to a wide range of cultural assets and expressions.

How to Integrate Culture into the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda

What are the implications of this for the post-2015 development agenda? How can culture be integrated within its goals, targets or indicators? The following notes are meant as initial suggestions to trigger discussion.

Fundamental: At a fundamental level, because culture is inherently a cross-cutting issue a culture-sensitive approach could be considered to be an overarching concern for all development initiatives, on a par with human rights, equality and sustainability. References to culture should thus be included in appropriate places within the future architecture of the post-2015 sustainable development agenda and clear guidance and monitoring mechanisms established to ensure the implementation of related principles.

Transversal: Moving from the principles to the core dimensions of sustainable development, one possibility would be to incorporate culture within goals relating to social and economic inclusion, environmental sustainability, peace and reconciliation. The realization of these goals should be measured using appropriate targets and indicators, including those relating to:

- Building capabilities and reducing poverty, by generating jobs within the cultural sector (the heritage and creative industries), especially for women, girls, young people and disadvantaged groups in developing counties;
- increasing participation in cultural life and access to culture for all, while at the same time promoting rights-based approaches to cultural diversity;
- contributing to environmental sustainability by conserving the historic environment, promoting creative design and the eco-arts, and safeguarding the traditional knowledge associated with the care of the environment;
- promoting intercultural dialogue in order to harness social cohesion by creating an environment conducive to sustainable development;
- strengthening local resilience and adaptation to climate change;
- integrating culture into policy and governance frameworks for sustainable development;
- fostering innovative funding and cooperation mechanisms in support of cultural initiatives.

A self-standing pillar of sustainable development: It would also be useful to envisage an independent sustainable development goal focusing on culture as a sector of activity, particularly with regard to inclusive social development. This would aim to enlarge people's capabilities to "lead the lives they have reason to value" through participation in cultural life and access to culture in all its diversity. It would highlight in particular culture's contributions to inclusive social development and human well-being, which could be articulated as follows:

- Guaranteeing people's freedom "to be and to live what they choose," in other words, to define themselves as members of society and more fully realize their aspirations;
- Providing a sense of belonging and connectedness and of being part of a community and maintaining close links to their roots and their land, these being things with which many people identify, especially indigenous peoples;
- Fostering an environment conducive to tolerance and mutual understanding in which there is an atmosphere of trust, diversity is acknowledged and respected, minorities and special groups are included, and society as a whole is stable and resilient;

- Offering the possibility of living in a beautiful place and natural environment on a human scale that can be understood and controlled;
- Providing an opportunity to build a cohesive society in which people contribute their time and resources to the general interest. As a common good, cultural assets and activities for their safeguarding, creation and sharing can provide an ideal entry point for social engagement and cooperation, these bringing people together around common interests, strengthening bonds and increasing the social capital of communities;
- Ensuring connections with sources of learning, inspiration and springs for creativity that strengthen innovation, entrepreneurship and the development of appropriate solutions to global and local challenges, including through science and technology.

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The achievement of this sustainable development goal focusing in culture would require respect for cultural diversity, the safeguarding of heritage, both tangible and intangible and cultural and natural, the fostering of cultural institutions, the building of a dynamic creative sector and the strengthening of the cultural and creative industries on the basis of proper intellectual property protection, and the promotion of equitable cultural tourism.

In designing activities to realize this goal the fundamental principles referred to on the "Realizing the Future We Want for All" report should be incorporated, these including the respect for human rights, and notably for cultural rights, the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of sustainability, while at the same time addressing issues of human security by fostering dialogue and mutual understanding and reinforcing commitments to international cooperation.

Measuring culture's qualitative and quantitative benefits: When advocating for the inclusion of culture into future development goals, it should be remembered that one of the reasons for the previous absence of culture from the core goals and methods used to effect sustainable development has been explained by difficulties in measuring its concrete contribution to development.

However, recent years have seen multidimensional measures of human well-being, among them the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index promoted by Bhutan and the Equitable and Sustainable Well-Being (BES) Index developed by Italy. These initiatives echo the need to address development in ways that go beyond mere references to GDP and instead aim to pursue a more equitable and sustainable world as well as a more fulfilled existence. These two indices include the human and social dimensions of development, as well as measurements of the quality of life, in the evaluation of sustainable development goals.

Particular attention should be paid to measuring the quantitative and qualitative contributions of culture to sustainable development by establishing clear indicators and accessible data at national, regional and international levels. These could be based on the growing wealth of data, statistics and methodologies that have resulted from scholarly research as well as from operational activities, notably through the implementation of UNESCO's cultural Conventions and the use of culture-specific indicators.[29] Such data, statistics and methodologies are crucially important in designing government policies on trade, industry practices, systems of incentives and the rights of creators.

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[29] The UNESCO Culture for Development Indicator Suite is a pioneering research and advocacy initiative that aims to establish a set of indicators highlighting how culture contributes to development at national level by fostering economic growth and helping individuals and communities to expand their life-choices and adapt to change.

Finally, common United Nations policies and practices should also be shaped in relation to culture and its importance for sustainable development through joint programming and the continuing exchange of experiences.