
Culture in the spotlight: Innovative approaches to sustainable development

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European Development Days 2015

Lab session report

Moderator: Damien Helly, Deputy Head of Programme Strengthening European External Action, European Centre for Development Policy Management

Speakers:

- Ingrid Leary, Director British Council New Zealand, accompanied by 6 performers from the Stages of Change theatre group from the Solomon Islands
- Lotte Knudsen, Director, Human Development and Migration, Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), European Commission
- Elsebeth Krogh, Executive Director, Danish Centre for Culture and Development (CKU)
- Alma Salem, Regional Arts Manager for MENA, British Council, and Co-curator of *Syria: Third Space* exhibition
- Gerardo Pataconi, Chief of Clusters and Business Linkages Unit, UNIDO, Project Leader on 'Cluster in Cultural and Creative Industries in the South Mediterranean'

Session Organiser: Anna Langdell, Culture & Development Manager, British Council

Attendance: 110 people (70 seated, 40 standing)

Session recording: can be found [here](#).

The session began with a short [documentary](#) on the EU-funded and British Council-run project **Stages of Change** and a brief live performance by the Solomon Islands all-women theatre group. The project addressed a culturally taboo subject – violence against women – through innovative community theatre and has seen immense success. The women from Stages of Change shared their experiences of gaining confidence, voice and empowerment by participating in the project. Stages of Change contributed to the passing of the *Family Protection Bill* in the Solomon Islands, in 2014. The women performers have now established an NGO, and plan to continue their hard work on reducing violence against women in the Pacific Islands.

The session aimed to connect speakers and audience experiences to concrete policy changes. **Lotte Knudsen** of DG DEVCO highlighted the important role culture plays in international development, and mentioned that the European Commission supports arts to address different types of violence. Culture is steadily being brought into the policy spotlight; however, a more holistic approach is needed to be able to promote culture through all fields of international development. For example, through diversity of cultural expression, justice, democracy, good governance and human rights are also promoted.

Culture is an important driver for economic development: it creates jobs, leads to creativity, and increases economic and inclusive sustainable development. In addition to culture, gender is at the top of the EU's development agenda, and DG DEVCO is currently preparing a second gender action plan based on gender as a premise for economic growth and peaceful societies. Leadership is another

fundamental element to help reach gender equality, and a shift is needed in the institutions' culture: gender has to be mainstreamed horizontally (through all 'hard'-sectors), and a financing framework must be established.

Elsebeth Krogh showcased the power of culture to create change in international development, and described the subsequent impact a cultural approach to sustainable development can achieve. However, culture cannot create change alone, thus collaboration with external relations and other international development actors is essential. Elsebeth called for more evidence to support the claim that culture is a key component of sustainable development, and provided some examples, such as Uganda's rap news shows, about how arts and culture help to address sensitive social issues.

Alma Salem made the case for artists and cultural operators and the social dimension of their work. Artists in conflict areas manage to mainstream challenges: they act as cultural leaders, humanising numbers and statistics, turning them into stories. This has been demonstrated in the *Syria: Third Space* exhibition, highlighting work by displaced artists and their role in recovery and resilience, in London and in the European Parliament. Artists transform the community voices in a lobbying and policy-making instrument, therefore culture should be part of an all-inclusive approach to development.

For **Gerardo Patacconi**, cultural heritage, creativity and people's talent are abundant raw materials for creating jobs, generating income, and contributing to poverty reduction. The focus should be on creating a conducive environment for the cultural and creative industries to produce marketable products, for example by using storytelling and development creative hubs.

The audience was invited by the moderator to contribute on the commonality of the speakers' approaches to culture and development, and to look particularly at the level of ambition that should be embedded in using culture for sustainable development. Calls from the floor came for more research collaboration, particularly with development-focused organisations such as IDS, the Food Bridge and the World Agroforestry Centre. Other participants (CISP) put the emphasis on the essential role of local initiatives and the added value of combining traditional techniques and crafts (such as earthen architecture) with modern and innovative technology. In addition, the discussion touched on the role of culture to enhance societal change, particularly when addressing negative aspects of local culture such as gender inequality and discrimination.

Lotte Knudsen rationalised culture and gender as mutually reinforcing sectors, which are included in the new sustainable development goals (SDGs) for the first time on such a level. She stressed the need for a strategic framework, and mentioned how the ambitions of using culture as an impact multiplier in sustainable development can be set in the SDGs. Culture cannot be seen as a marginal sector, it should be mainstreamed in all other sectors, to innovate, create employment and build capacity.

The speakers rounded-up the first part of the session by setting the ambition of achieving a business case for the role of culture in socio-economic development. Moreover, culture should be used as an advocacy tool, while cultural resources should be clustered together to reach wider markets, such as in the case of Armenian jewellery makers in Beirut brought up by Gerardo Patacconi. The potential of digital technologies was also highlighted.

The second round of audience interventions revealed that hard evidence and research on the benefits of culture do exist, and furthermore, that culture is often already used in particularly difficult environments, for example in peace building and reconciliation. There was also some hesitancy to push the integration of culture across development areas, as there is a risk that culture will become everyone's responsibility and therefore no one's responsibility. The key message positions culture as the 'how' of development, not the 'what', since cultural values are intrinsic. The science field calls for open dialogue with cultural actors, to exchange views on how culture can be used as a tool for advocacy and storytelling to influence behaviour change.

What are the policy implications of culture in the spotlight?

Culture brings about trust and mutual understanding, but there is a need for a broader strategy to encompass all actions in a long-term approach. It is essential not to view culture in isolation, but to create synergies and perceive it as a dynamic, vibrant sector with potential for robust impact.

Political support at the highest level for culture is also essential, and the SDGs are a strong step in this direction. Subsequently, the focus should fall on the how of culture, on the enforcement of its tools, on the development of new, flexible and responsive formats to engage a wider public. Culture has been deemed a means for sustainable development, however, its income generating, equal opportunities promotion and job creation elements need to be more integrated.

Overall, the moderator highlighted the consensus in the room on the important role of culture in sustainable development, and the appetite for collaboration to bring together various areas of expertise into co-creation hubs. Policy processes to influence include the upcoming EU strategic documents (security and external strategy, Neighbourhood policy, DEVCO frameworks for gender and culture) and the integration of culture in the SDGs, which will be finalised in September 2015.