*Culture and development: a priority for the EU?*

Gijs de Vries[[1]](#endnote-1)

The cultural and creative industries are among the fastest growing sectors in the world. UNESCO found they generate nearly 30 million jobs worldwide and employ more people aged 15 to 29 than any other sector. For women as well as men, the income and self-esteem generated by the cultural sector is vital to fighting poverty and enhancing freedom. There is good reason, therefore, why EU governments should support culture as a vector of sustainable development. Unfortunately, domestic politics sometimes stands in the way. Cultural expenditure is increasingly being politicised by right-wing opponents.

In 2017 tabloids such as The Sun ran a campaign ridiculing British financial support for an Ethiopian NGO that uses music and radio to spread awareness about girls’ rights. Headlines such as “Britain pays £5 million to ‘Ethiopian Spice Girls’” prompted an MP to ask why the cash for the pop group was not spent on the UK’s elderly population. In response, the British government scrapped the subsidy. In Denmark, the respected Centre for Culture and Development was closed down in 2016.

Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals demand a more positive approach. The SDGs commits governments to promote global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity as well as of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (target 4.7). Governments agreed to support sustainable tourism that promotes local culture (SDGs 8 and 12). In target 11.4 they promised to safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.

In addition to the targets where culture is mentioned explicitly, some goals contain targets that, although they do not directly refer to culture, are critical to promoting cultural rights and freedoms. Examples include targets 4.4 (skills), 5.5 (gender equality in leadership), 8.3 (creativity and innovation), and 10.2 (inclusiveness to minorities). Equally important are the commitments in SDG 16 to improve governance, including by combating the killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates. UNESCO has started a campaign to combat violence against journalists and other media personnel. Supporting and co-financing this campaign should be a priority for all governments.

All in all, Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals provide plenty of opportunities for ambitious and comprehensive cultural policies. The SDGs imply that culture must be an integral part of policies to alleviate poverty, promote education, gender equality, and sustainable urbanization, and build peaceful societies that respect universal human rights. This is the most comprehensive agenda for culture the world has ever seen.

Such huge opportunities, of course, come with equally significant risks. One of the principal risks is failure to realize the necessary integrated policies. The SDGs call for an integrated approach to culture, at international level as well as nationally. Holistic policy making and policy delivery is impossible without interdepartmental cooperation and coordination – the bane of any government. Agenda 2030 also demands unprecedented public-private cooperation. Will Ministries of Culture sit down with Ministries of Foreign Affairs and development agencies? Will governments reach out to civil society organizations, and vice versa? Will national cultural institutes be prepared to think outside the box? But coordination is not the only challenge. Delivering the SDGs will require resources, time, and sustained efforts. Also needed are transparency, accountability, and a willingness to learn. Perhaps most importantly, this agenda requires leadership. Ministers will have to assume personal responsibility, focus, and sustain their interest. The EU must lead by example.

In 2015 EU ministers promised to mainstream culture in development. It is time for them to act on this promise by targeting cultural ODA on the poorest countries in the global South, instead of favouring richer recipients, as is the case today. The European Commission, for its part, should publish a White Paper (‘Communication’) on the subject. What should such a European approach to culture in development entail? To reflect the SDGs, three elements should be at the heart of EU policy: culture and education, culture and governance, and culture and conflict.

**Education** is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights.

When mainstreamed in education, culture builds confidence and encourages dialogue. Cultural expressions are essential for the development of young people: they build self-confidence and critical skills, helping them to achieve better educational results. Artists help society to reflect on the human condition and improve it. The EU should assist them to boost arts and creativity in the classroom.

The EU should also reach out to its foreign partners in dialogue and processes of mutual learning. The SDGs invite countries to enter into partnerships and mutual commitments, something fully in line with the EU’s preference for multilateralism. These mutual commitments should include European initiatives to improve knowledge of the non-Western world in Europe itself. History curricula in Europe mostly teach national history, with a smattering of European history; the history and social reality of other parts of the world still gets surprisingly little attention. The age of colonialism is long past but Eurocentrism still permeates European education. If educational institutions, cultural organizations and governments in Europe are serious about the SDGs, a good way to start would be to bring a more global perspective to national education.

One of the areas which needs **effective, transparent, and accountable institutions** is culture. The EU could, first of all, support systems of cultural governance that are transparent and open to influence from civil society, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, class, or ability. It could also assist partners to integrate culture in national development plans that are subject to integral evaluation, reporting, and public scrutiny. National statistical offices could be supported in collecting, analysing, and reporting the necessary cultural statistics. The EU could support links between local governments in EU member states and their counterparts in other parts of the world, including through UNESCO’s Creative Cities Network. EU embassies could help raise popular awareness of the SDGs at the many EU festivals of films, food, and literature. And, crucially, the EU can help ensure that cultural policies and practices across the world are embedded in respect for artistic freedom, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

A third priority for the EU could be **culture and conflict**. Culture is not an innocent possession. Images can be instruments of propaganda. Songs can be weapons of war, and music a tool of torture. Radio was used in Rwanda to incite genocide. Serb artillery deliberately destroyed the Sarajevo library. Islamist extremists turned the World Heritage site of Palmyra to rubble. Members of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra received death threats for playing classical music.Depressing examples abound.

But culture also holds much positive potential. Theatre and museum can contribute to reconciliation. Culture can help refugees and migrants to build resilience and overcome trauma. Most of the world’s 65.6 million forcibly displaced people live outside Europe. If Europe were to invest in international dialogue about cultural empowerment it might find it has as much to learn as to share.

Illegal trade in archaeological artefacts is big business, and Europeans play an active part. Via Facebook antiquities can be stolen on request (‘loot-to-order’). Sophisticated networks of traders and robbers share information about how and where to dig. The traffickers come mostly from the Middle East, users are based in the United States, Germany, France, the UK, Belgium and elsewhere. European governments must do more to stop this shameful trade. Europol too has work to do.

ISIS’ destruction and looting of world heritage in Syria and Iraq has thrown the need to protect cultural heritage into sharp relief. Only 133 states have joined the 1954 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. All EU member states have joined it, except Malta. The other principal treaty is the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This has been ratified by 138 states; Ireland, Latvia, and Malta are still missing in action. Getting more countries to ratify and apply these important treaties would be a fitting target of European cultural diplomacy. France, Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK have launched schemes to protect cultural heritage. The European Commission, too, provides project finance, and heritage protection was included in the mandate of the EU’s advisory mission on security sector reform in Iraq (EUAM Iraq). What remains to be achieved is synergy. There is obvious scope for a more coordinated approach.

In conclusion, there are plenty of opportunities for the EU to drive the global agenda on culture in development. Development is freedom, as Amartya Sen famously wrote, and culture can be a powerful driver and an enabler of development. The cause of culture in development needs champions. Will the EU be among them?

1. Gijs de Vries is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The article is based on his paper *Cultural Freedom in European Foreign Policy* (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)