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Towards More Sustainable Development

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Abstract

What is the role of multilateral organisations in delivering the Sustainable Development Agenda and what is the significance of Cultural Relations for this discussion? This report reflects the views expressed at the 2023 ICRRA Conference Towards More Sustainable Development. Multilateral organisations and cultural relations in the 2030 agenda and beyond. The authors formulate recommendations on how culture can and should be used to reach the SDGs: They stress the importance of Cultural Rights and the reflection on power dynamics and representation for a more inclusive multilateralism.

Towards More Sustainable Development

Multilateral Organisations and Cultural Relations in the 2030 Agenda and beyond

"Development can only be sustainable if it is determined by, and infused with, the values of the people it involves. It can only be sustainable if it allows people to promote their aspirations and protect their resources and incorporate their heritage in all its dimensions; tangible, living and natural."[1]
Alexandra Xanthaki, United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights

"Multilateral organizations must actively engage with civil society, particularly, minorities in stateless communities, in a truly inclusive way. These underrepresented groups are significant international players, profoundly affected by Human Rights violations, climate crisis and civil conflicts." [2]
Mercè Monje Cano, Secretary General of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

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[1] Alexandra Xanthaki (2023) "Cultural Rights: Towards a more inclusive international governance." Keynote Address, ICRRA Conference 2023, 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/O_LWC2mPJOA?si=5Mtl0AbEt11otz8r (14:53-15:21)
[2] Mercè Monje Cano (2023) Panel 3: "Gaps in Representation" | ICRRA Conference 2023 2 November 2023 - https://youtu.be/xVz__-pYkXU?si=X5jB9wgfwFnWAu4a (07:19-07:40)

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Introduction

It is the ongoing mission of our global network – the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance (ICRRA) – to convene and connect researchers and practitioners of International Cultural Relations (ICR) and promote new knowledge and evidence-based advice for policy and practice. As a network, we are committed to the enhancement of human society through cultural relations as a praxis of communication, empowerment and enablement. Our 2023 conference ***Towards More Sustainable Development. Multilateral organisations and cultural relations in the 2030 agenda and beyond***[3] discussed the role of culture and cultural relations within global efforts to tackle the pressing challenges of sustainable development. It aimed at underscoring the United Nations (UN) **Agenda 2030** and the call of the **UN Summit of the Future** in 2024 for more effective multilateralism in addressing the pressing challenges of global governance. It asked:

What is the role of multilateral organisations in delivering the sustainable development agenda and what is the role and significance of cultural relations to this discussion?

Background

In 2021, the UN launched *Our Common Agenda*, a report which looks ahead to the next 25 years. It is a vision of the future of global cooperation and "calls for inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism to better respond to humanity's most pressing challenges" (Our Common Agenda | United Nations (2023-04-05)). In September 2024, the *Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow* is being held to "enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance, reaffirm existing commitments including to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Charter, and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system which is better positioned to impact people's lives positively" (Summit of the Future | United Nations (2023-04-05)). As a network, we are convinced that a cultural relations approach can make a significant contribution to these goals.

This Policy Brief shares the overarching message of the network's 2023 conference regarding the potential for international cultural relations to re-energise delivery of the SDGs and support a renewed understanding of multilateral, multiagency cultural cooperation and relations in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. Examples of cultural relations in action, taken from the conference, are included to illustrate these points and exemplify how a cultural relations approach can provide points of engagement and sustainable development across geographical, political, economic, cultural, and ideological divides.

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[3] ICRRA Conference 2023 "Towards More Sustainable Development". Full Playlist, 30 October and 2 November 2023 – https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL68DLWW5ZNT1xuSjedvO5SJYOaHlQjHek&si=FpRk1xCMtGHweZCz

Towards a More Inclusive Multilateralism

In an environment of an intensively debated and contested international order, where the notion of universally agreed rights is often challenged, the conference explored the possibilities of 'more effectiveness via more inclusiveness' along three strands: first, it inquired about the role of cultural policy, strategies and delivery in ensuring diversity of perspectives in societies as they try to find new practices to deliver on the SDGs. It then interrogated the issues of 'locatedness' and contextualisation of perspectives on multilateralism. Finally, it addressed the question of who and what is represented in the current multilateral system and raised questions about potential gaps in voices heard and issues raised.

A clear tenet of the conference was that inclusiveness means integrating a multitude of stakeholders, allowing localised understandings within a system of commonly agreed rights. As UN Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, Alexandra Xanthaki phrased it:

"A Human Rights approach, with strong consideration on Cultural Rights, must be the framework and must be the guarantee of success of any development agenda." [4]

The conference emphasised cultural relations as an appropriate yet distinctive approach to collaboration with communities and stakeholders in diverse global contexts, characterised by mutuality, reciprocity and sensitivity to local needs. This practice is more than bringing people of different backgrounds, countries and communities together through and around culture and education. In the context of SDGs, as became evident through the cases presented at the conference, it means, first and foremost, empowerment.

Allowing more pluralism in a multilateral system:

"I think the issue with multilateralism is the issue of the backlash against globalisation. It is because of this notion, that globalisation has removed, in effect, the barriers of sovereignty and all of that, that those within those domestic national jurisdictions want to make a claim, want to re-assert their notions of identity." [5]
Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

A range of views were voiced on the issue of accommodating plurality of interpretation and interventions in multilateralism and thus regaining more national sovereignty. Several speakers positively perceived a multipolar multilateral system composed of five or six global superpowers and a strong regional cooperation structure which is attuned to the context of individual nations with different sociocultural settings. However, the question remains how Human Rights, understood as a common legal framework, can be upheld in such an environment and requires further discussion.

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[4] Alexandra Xanthaki (2023) "Cultural Rights: Towards a more inclusive international governance." Keynote Address, ICRRA Conference 2023, 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/O_LWC2mPJOA?si=5Mtl0AbEt11otz8r (15:22-15:32)
[5] Dr Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu (2023) Panel 2: "Understandings of multilateralism in different regional contexts" | ICRRA Conference 2023: 2 November 2023 - https://youtu.be/fKriXlvahnI?si=iZqN6L0YvR5-8xxT (13:36-14:12)

This aligns with the need to establish culture as a distinct stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal focused on empowerment of communities in the context of Human Rights and Cultural Rights. Xanthaki however acknowledged the challenge that exclusive group formations could be supported this way. She stressed that the only way to counter exclusive tendencies, is to integrate, implement and conduct these rights within the full, overarching Human Rights framework.

Beyond sectorial thinking

This idea of being open to conversations and exchanges beyond our usual professional and personal circles is well illustrated by a quote from Pablo Raphael de la Madrid, former General Director of International Affairs at the Mexico Ministry of Culture and Executive Coordinator of the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development, MONDIACULT 2022, when he stressed that, *"...in an increasingly diversified world more than ever it is needed to speak to others"*. And further:

"The idea of building new cultural policies related to multilateral organisations is first to understand that all cultural agencies or agents or artists or creators that don't build relationships with other sectors that we never speak to, must learn to speak to strangers. Cultural agents always speak among each other, but rarely speak to outside agencies or members of the system in the UN that we don't speak to."[6]

The cultural relations approach implies remaining open and paying attention to peoples and perspectives from different regions, different belief systems or other sectors of society such as the economy or healthcare.

Participatory call to action and more inclusive representation

In engaging with diverse and divergent communities, the conference stressed the continued importance of ensuring various peoples are brought to the table to enable them to talk to each other, listen, appreciate, and learn. **Participation and participatory endeavours** are vital in facilitating conversations around local and global challenges (Pablo Raphael de la Madrid). This would nurture emerging forms of multilateralism.

The conference foregrounded the significance of cultural actors as facilitators of activities related to sociocultural-geographical spheres. Jordi Pascual from the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) emphasised **the concept of cultural spheres** wherein different spheres collide and overlap: for instance, policies from urban planning to tourism to the arts overlap. Yet despite these intersections, there remain **fundamental structural problems which inhibit the realisation of the SDGs**. This relates particularly to the framing of relationships between the 'West' and the 'Global South', with the former arguably still sustaining the master text of the Global South as 'other' in order to set its own agenda and

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[6] Pablo Raphael de la Madrid (2023) Panel 1: "The Value of Multilateral Organisations in a 2030 and post-2030 SDG Environment" | ICRRA Conference 2023: 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/OBtL0iZS38g?si=uFKRnDOhKZAZ2Hok (05:09 – 05:57)

achieve its own goals. According to Ouafa Belgacem, founder and CEO of Culture Funding Watch, multilateral organisations must question the inherent power structures which are at play in the framing of the Global South by opening up inquiries around what is fair cultural practice and whether what is 'equal' is necessarily 'fair' or equitable.

"If multilateralism does not question power dynamics, there will never be collaboration, they will never be together. The discussion will never be constructive because there will always be someone more powerful than the other and the relationship will not be built on the right basis."[7]

Ben Hampe, Project Director at the ASEAN Foundation, lucidly captured the urgent need for inclusiveness in developing programmes, putting it in the Asian context:

"I think the main point that we've driven through this entire experience is that we need to decentralize all of these programmes and actually take them away from the major cities in Southeast Asia and then do these programmes in, well not necessarily remote, but at least places across Southeast Asia that have cultural or arts communities that we can work with. Otherwise, the development focus is always on the major cities and that doesn't really make sense because we are still, in essence, a development programme."[8]

Engaging with this call to action, new forms of multilateralism are emerging with a significant emphasis in the form of transnational stakeholder-based interest alliances. Often, these alliances as well as smaller political entities like cities are more capable of fast responses to development challenges and issues and concerns, especially in times of crisis.

Understanding 'Culture' in Development

The "Cinderella of Human Rights"?

Despite the current efforts to aim for the acknowledgement of culture as a standalone SDG in a post-2030 agenda, it seems that different understandings of culture still complicate the debate. United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights Alexandra Xanthaki sees culture as a social practice, as a way of living encompassing peoples' priorities, values, principles, and vision. She emphasised a Human Rights framework which works in tandem with a Cultural Rights framework, an approach which acknowledges the indivisibility of these rights. This is the best way to safeguard the complexity of human social life. Accordingly, it is a logical consequence to also recognise the interdependence and indivisibility of the SDGs. However, an

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[7] Ouafa Belgacem (2023) Panel 1: "The Value of Multilateral Organisations in a 2030 and post-2030 SDG Environment" | ICRRA Conference 2023: 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/OBtL0iZS38g?si=uFKRnDOhKZAZ2Hok (27:49 – 28:07)

[8] Benjamin Milton Hampe (2023) Panel 3: "Gaps in Representation" | ICRRA Conference 2023: 2 November 2023 - https://youtu.be/xVz__-pYkXU?si=IqX0aXyG0LRReU9V (41:05-41:38)

understanding of the intrinsic value of Cultural Rights as a cogwheel within sustainable development efforts still needs to be further developed. As Xanthaki phrased it:

"Cultural Rights continue to be the 'Cinderella' of Human Rights. When we talk about economic, social, and Cultural Rights, and how important they are and how they should take their place next to civil and political rights, when we talk about the indivisibility of Human Rights, and how important this indivisibility is, especially when it comes to sustainable development, Cultural Rights have been absent from all these discussions. The Cultural Rights framework has been non-existent."[9]

A "floating signifier"?

Partially complementing Xanthaki while raising new issues, Yudhishthir Raj Isar, Education Director of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, called for a disaggregation practice. In his view, to define culture as encompassing all the challenges of the human condition would be too broad, too expansive to be translatable into policies. He stressed that 'sustainable development', in the original use of the term, had a clear ecological focus: it concerned climate change, it concerned environmental degradation. According to Isar, it is a problem that the term has since been greatly stretched beyond this original meaning to embrace practically every aspect of the human condition and in this way has limited scope to be translated into policies. To Isar, the term sustainability has become a 'floating signifier'. Accordingly, the role of culture in helping achieve sustainable development goals remains unclear:

"The pairing of Culture and development is ambiguous as well...Is it cultural? Is it development for culture? Is it culture for development? Or is it culture in development? Are we talking about cultural development as the flourishing of the arts and culture sector...or are we talking about the flourishing of ways of life as a whole?"[10]

Isar underlines his argument by his perception that sustainability is not present in the policies and agendas of cultural ministries in developing countries. Isar calls for putting culture "back in its place" and deriving a more clearly defined significance of culture policy objectives which are both more realistic and, at the same time, more ambitious:

"Who would ever deny that the work of artists, and art, can powerfully illuminate the challenges [of sustainable development]? Artists can help to transform hearts and minds by envisioning alternative futures and bringing about an, you might say, a re-enchantment.[11]

However, arguably this approach risks conceptualising culture as a secondary or niche sector practice, something which is only ever granted some function and resources by other societal sectors and never understood on its own terms. Culture as works of art in this understanding

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[9] Alexandra Xanthaki (2023) "Cultural Rights: Towards a more inclusive international governance." Keynote Address, ICRRA Conference 2023, 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/O_LWC2mPJOA?si=5Mtl0AbEt11otz8r (00:07:01-00:07:34)

[10] Yudhishthir Raj Isar (2023) "Putting 'culture' back in its place." Keynote Address, ICRRA Conference 2023, 30 October 2023 - https://youtu.be/9q9T64WR-x8?si=oJpwqLeRgVihxvxt (11:12-11:47)

[11] Yudhishthir Raj Isar (2023), ibid - https://youtu.be/9q9T64WR-x8?si=oJpwqLeRgVihxvxt (24:31-24:52)

might become reduced in the context of the SDGs to, and only legitimised by, its communication, illustration or awareness-raising role. Discussions concluded that these approaches do not need to be understood as mutually exclusive: a standalone goal of culture to safeguard spaces for creativity as a vehicle for articulating sustainable development, and culture as the hard drive of a people's identity and essence through which the concept of sustainable development is processed, interpreted and operationalised, brings together different pieces of the puzzle. Article 2 (2) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stresses the obligation to guarantee Cultural Rights for all without discrimination. It implies the right to access and enjoy cultural heritage, the right to take part in cultural life as well the rights to artistic and scientific freedom. **Therefore, it implies the obligation to protect the conditions which facilitate the exercise of human creativity beyond the creation of pieces of art, also as a social practice.**

The right to exist: culture and resilience

Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta, Director-General of the National Art and Culture Museum Complex (Art Arsenal) in Ukraine, emphasises that cultural relations are also about the **right to exist and be present in the world.** The Ukraine experience in the midst of war reveals the power of art to enable societies to think about resilience through collective action. This embodied cultural practice *in situ* gives voice to highly localised or situated knowledge experiences. In increasingly complex geopolitical environments, it becomes critical that policy and ICR imperatives capture these emerging knowledge experiences to inform and shape multilateral dialogue. While they may seem cumbersome, multilateral organisations should facilitate speed over bureaucracy once issues are identified and agency is established. Multilateral organisations can become a source of support for localised environments in peril.

The Role of International Cultural Relations

The Human Rights framework grants rights simply on the basis of being human, on belonging to the human species. Belonging to a cultural grouping with its unique identities is part of these rights. It implies the right to live with a culture of one's choice. Accordingly, a decision on how to practice multilateralism needs to be made by all parties.

This gets to the heart of what International Cultural Relations (ICR) and a cultural relations approach can contribute to multilateral organisations. Focused on the objective of trust building, on cooperation understood as a standard process, the cultural relations approach deliberates on perspectives, decisions, adaptation of contexts, and open, solution-oriented exchanges.

Kimani Njogu, Executive Director of Twaweza Communications, noted:

"The roots of cultural relations are the people in their diversity, in their complexity, in their contextual situatedness. I think that is really, really critical in my understanding of cultural relations. The other critical element for me is the element of mutuality that together we can resolve issues that pertain to our situations

as well as issues that might be external to our own situations. So, a mutual engagement through dialogue, through deep and deliberate engagement with each other, and I think that, at the call of that mutuality is really the ability to listen much more to the other side other than to our own voices."[12]

In other words, ICR advocates relations based intrinsically on, as Mandi Rukuni phrased it, the values of mutual respect, mutual benefit and mutual responsibilities. Multilateralism works only with consensus on the advantages of cooperation of all of the parties involved. Yet, most of the time, heterogeneous perceptions exist within a multilateral organisation. The effective delivery of the SDGs therefore relies on more effective cross-sectionality and more inclusive stakeholder participation within decision-making processes. From an ICR perspective, since the conditions and needs of diverse stakeholders cannot be predicted or assumed, there is a need for operational logics of continuous and iterative deliberation beyond mere consultation. And this can only be realised in environments of intersocietal connectivity, which ICR seeks to promote and enable. To exemplify and contextualise these observations, the conference shared and discussed various examples of cultural relations programmes and interventions. These included:

- **Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth**: a British Council programme highlighting the role of cultural heritage in the process of inclusion, both globally and locally, with a focus on community-based approaches as the basis for effective and respectful intercultural dialogue and cultural relations;
- **The work of the UNDP's regional bureau for Arab states**, emphasising how young people should be seen as partners in intercultural dialogue and driving forces in the implementation of development programmes, supported by investment in their competencies such as leadership skills;
- **The Artists at Risk programme** (PEN America), drawing attention to the role of artists as defenders of Cultural and Human Rights and the necessity of their inclusion in intercultural dialogue and multilateralism to raise awareness of Human Rights issues, mobilise social and political movements, and advocate for change.

These and other examples of cultural relations in action which were shared during the conference pointed to common conclusions. Firstly, cultural relations can support multilateral organisations to become more effective platforms for intercultural dialogue. Secondly, this dialogue should start from the very local level – and be sensitive to local context and nuance – to be effective. Thirdly, due attention should be given to the axiological dimension, to the values on which the cultures are based.

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[12] Kimani Njogu (2023) Panel 4: "The role of cultural relations: Case studies from around the world" | ICRRA Conference 2023: 2 November 2023 - https://youtu.be/GGffoMVc1ls?si=XWGGMhEBkopwR_-V (11:59 – 13:03)

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Key Findings and Recommendations

- **Cultural Rights** are essential for facilitating and realising sustainable development and should be anchored in the **Pact for the Future** and through a specific Culture Goal in any follow-up to the SDGs to emphasise this role.
- It needs to be acknowledged that **different regional perspectives on the SDGs** exist, as well as different priorities due to different life conditions and contexts. Accordingly, regional institutions internalise in different ways, at the regional level of action, the proposals in the field of development raised by the UN (2030 Agenda, etc.) as a multilateral organisation.
- Even within multilateral organisations, **power dynamics** prevail. This needs to be acknowledged and consideration needs to be given to how multilateral organisations can embody 'power with' as opposed to 'power over' within their processes: safe spaces must be provided to address this.
- A cross-sectorial approach, including the cultural sector, needs to be strengthened as a key for the effective delivery of SDGs. The **cross-sectorial approach** might be seen as the **key paradigm shift** in development intended by the SDGs. Further process development of multilateral organisations is needed in order to **enhance inclusion of civil society**, especially cultural practitioners, beyond mere consultation.
- Arts and what artists do needs to be highlighted. The **power of art** can foster understanding. Cultural relations approaches can help multilateral organisations to empower artists and cultural practitioners working in complex global environments to give voice to the voiceless. Enabling everybody to envision and find new ways of living and establishing more sustainable futures needs a strong cultural sector.

Further reading:

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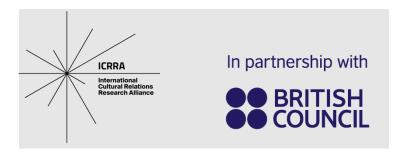
Imprint

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