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UNESCO EVALUATION INSIGHTS

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EVALUATION INSIGHTS provides a snapshot of UNESCO's work in evaluation. Its purpose is to share insights and ideas with interested stakeholders and to feed into ongoing discussions about the contribution of evaluation to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The current first edition of **EVALUATION INSIGHTS** is dedicated to an evaluation of UNESCO's Work on Culture and Sustainable Development.

UNESCO'S WORK ON CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Evaluation of a Policy Theme

We need to remember that we are all created creative and can invent new scenarios as frequently as they are needed.

Maya Angelou

The relationship between culture and sustainable development has been the subject of discussions over three decades, culminating in five United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the topic that confirm the need for sustainable development policies to be responsive to cultural context on one hand, and the contribution of culture to sustainable development on the other. They call for the mainstreaming of culture into economic, social and environmental development policies and strategies. The role of local culture in conflict prevention, resolution, reconciliation and recovery; the linkages between cultural and biological diversity; the importance of safeguarding local and indigenous traditional knowledge and community practices of environmental management; the need to take culture into account when promoting alternative consumption and production patterns; and to ensure that women and men can equally access, participate in and contribute to cultural life and decision making, are also emphasized.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also includes several targets that reflect the contribution of culture to the three dimensions of sustainable development. UNESCO, being the specialized UN agency for culture, is called to provide guidance and support in this area. It exercises this role through its policy and standard-setting work at global level, and by supporting programmes and projects at national level.

Why this evaluation?

The purpose of the evaluation was to assist UNESCO to strengthen, focus and better coordinate its work in this area. Building on previous evaluations of UNESCO's standard setting work in culture and on other studies, it also intended to deepen organizational knowledge about the relationship between culture and sustainable development. Specifically, the evaluation focused on an assessment of the relevance, effectiveness and coherence of UNESCO's policy environment, and on the value added of UNESCO's cultural work to sustainable development at national level.

In UNESCO the work on culture and sustainable development is often associated with the Organization's culture sector. However, other sectors also contribute. As a consequence, while focusing on culture, education and the sciences were also included in the evaluation. The timing of the evaluation coincided with the global discussions of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, which provided the larger context for it. Several of the insights generated are of relevance to non-UNESCO stakeholders working on sustainable development as well.



Bali Cultural Landscape, The Subak System.
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What we learned

The larger international agenda

Whereas cultural aspects were largely absent from the UN Millennium Declaration and its accompanying MDGs, the reflection on the relation between culture and sustainable development has made substantial progress since then, at least in some contexts. This is demonstrated, inter alia, by the above mentioned GA resolutions, and the integration of culture in broader international initiatives, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. UNESCO's advocacy efforts and many implementation examples that illustrate how culture contributes to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development have played a significant part in

advancing this theme. UNESCO's culture conventions and the MDG-F's Thematic Window on Culture and Development were at the centre of these efforts, but programmes such as MAB (Man and the Biosphere) and LINKS (Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems) also played a role.

Narratives on culture and sustainable development

In the absence of one overall Organization-wide policy or strategy for the work on culture and sustainable development, various different policy messages and narratives on culture and sustainable development co-exist within UNESCO's culture sector and across the Organization. Some of them are articulated, while others are implicit. UNESCO should become more conscious of these narratives, and of the assumptions that underlie them, so that different perspectives and prevailing tensions and contradictions can be acknowledged, negotiated and reconciled if necessary.

Inter-sectoral cooperation

Work on culture and sustainable development is, by definition, inter-sectoral. This seems to be obvious, and yet in reality, inter-sectoral cooperation between culture and other sectors is rare, both in policy and in implementation. The fact that the integration between culture and sustainable development has not happened at the level of the Organization considerably weakens UNESCO's advocacy efforts for the integration of culture in sustainable social, environmental and economic development at global, national and local levels.



Mongolia, Khustain Nuruu National Park; using solar energy.
Photo: Barbara Torggler

A systemic approach to the policy field of culture and sustainable development

Recently, the policy environment for the culture and sustainable development work related to several standard-setting instruments in culture was improved significantly. The evaluation highlights areas where policy effectiveness and synergies could be further increased in the future: The interplay between gender and culture, for instance, should be further explored, and the gender dimension of the standard-setting work in culture be strengthened. There is also a need to pay more attention to the cultural dimension of nature conservation, to the linkages between tangible and intangible heritage, and overall to the policy and implementation requirements for the creation of a

sound cultural eco-system that contributes to sustainable development.

The evaluation also suggests the development of one overarching Organization-wide framework for culture and sustainable development that brings the various narratives that co-exist within the Organization to light, explains the linkages between the different strands of work, and provides guidance to staff and other stakeholders.

The intrinsic value of culture as a dimension of sustainable development

In recent years UNESCO has been emphasizing culture's potential to drive social, environmental, and economic development as well as peace and security. This has somewhat overshadowed efforts to demonstrate how heritage and the diversity of cultural expressions are also aims in themselves, not only because of their intrinsic value, but also from a sustainable development perspective, as they contribute to the intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual wellbeing of people, and enable them to exercise their human rights, including their cultural rights.

Implementation

UNESCO and its partners have provided concrete evidence for the potential of culture to contribute to sustainable development, and in raising people's awareness about the negative effects of un-sustainable development on culture. This is largely thanks to the MDG-F's Thematic Window on Culture and Development, convened by UNESCO, which has considerably boosted the Organization's engagement in this area and given it a lot of visibility.

Many implementation challenges also exist, including the need to ensure follow-up and continuity of the work that has been started. The cultural dimension of sustainable development also needs to be better demonstrated; and advocacy for the inclusion of culture in UNDAFs, joint UN programmes, and other mechanisms at country level be further strengthened. Advocacy material and capacity-building tools are required to that effect.

Going Forward

The discourse about culture and sustainable development has evolved significantly over the past 25 years. Not only, but also, this is thanks to UNESCO. However, uniting culture and sustainable development is still a relatively new field when it comes to putting theoretical insights into practical action on the ground. UNESCO is uniquely positioned to demonstrate how this can be done, and to strengthen with concrete examples and tangible results the relevance of the Organization's discourse to the larger Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This will require paying increased attention to cultural context within the international human rights framework; a deepened understanding of sustainable development by cultural stakeholders; inter-sectoral partnerships to transcend the traditional boundaries of each sector; resources, and some experimentation and innovation.