



REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

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FARIDA SHAHEED

Special Rapporteur of the United Nations
in the field of Cultural Rights.

In our ever-faster, more globalized and technological world, it is time to pause and seriously think whether the development path we are rushing down is in fact sustainable or even desirable. For progress to be sustainable we must shift from conceiving of, planning for and implementing development in disconnected siloes to a more holistic approach conjoining the environmental, economic and social dimensions of development in a single embrace. Culture, increasingly recognised as a driver of the economy, is the threads intertwining these dimensions. Imbedded in the very fabric of our lives, culture can both facilitate and obstruct ownership of development agendas, promoting or impeding success. The role of culture for sustainable development is hence crucial and depends on ensuring cultural rights for all: making sure that every woman, man and child can access, take part in and contribute to cultural life and all this implies.

Culture is how we assign meaning to our lives and understand our human, natural and manufactured environment.

Too many people continue to dismiss culture as a luxury because they see culture only in terms of a limited number of particular manifestations. I assure you, neither culture nor cultural rights are luxuries; they are absolute necessities. Culture permeates all spheres of life: from dry legal texts to the vibrant colours and tempos of artistic endeavours; from what and how we eat to the expansive urban cultural landscapes of mega-cities. Culture is more than the clothes we wear, the songs we sing to celebrate life and mourn its passing. It is the core of being human: it is how we assign meaning to our lives and understand our human, natural and manufactured environment, as individuals and collectives. Culture embodies our collective humanity, with all its fragilities and imperfections, creative geniuses but also darkneses, our pursuit of knowledge, innovation and pleasure. As a dynamic vibrant process, culture provides the site for contesting, and contested, meanings and values, jostling for acceptance in an ever-changing world¹. Culture helps us resist and overcome adversities and trauma; it embodies our joys, our fears and our hopes for the future.

¹ See A/HRC/14/36, Initial report in cultural rights.

As the first mandate holder appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council in the field of cultural rights, it has been my honour and privilege, both exciting and challenging, to try and determine what is encompassed by cultural rights as human rights. This on-going task has been facilitated by the wisdom, passion and expertise of many people. I share here some of my key thoughts.



Individuals must be free to leave, rejoin or create new communities of shared cultural values without fear.

Cultural rights protect the rights of each person, individually, in community with others, and as groups of people, to develop and express their humanity, their worldviews and understanding of life and development through values, beliefs, languages, knowledge, expressions, institutions and the pursuit of specific ways of life. Cultural rights are closely related to rights such as the freedom of expression, opinion and belief, to creativity in various material and non-material forms; to identity and belonging to multiple, diverse and changing communities; to the ability to access cultural heritage and contemporary resources; to education and language. In many ways, cultural rights are pivotal to the recognition and respect of human dignity, which must always be the central concern of all development.



Development strategies are contingent upon the factors and dynamics operative on the ground, including local knowledge, cultural traditions, practices and values.

Development strategies can only be implemented, and human rights enjoyed, within specific cultural and socioeconomic frameworks; they are hence contingent upon the factors and dynamics operative on the ground, including local knowledge, cultural traditions, practices and values. It is well to recognise that “hardly any culture ... has not, at a given moment, violated human rights”, and that being dynamic, cultures are “subjected to many influences and internal debates and internal contestations, they change over time ... it is myopic [and] misinformed to say that cultures are essentially pro or anti-human rights. They are in fact neither of the two and a fertile arena for contestation”².

As a site of exchange, recognition, and contestation, it is culture that enables communities to continuously evolve, to surmount challenges, and to move towards greater inclusion of all. Cities maximise the opportunities of cross-cultural engagements, interactions and exchanges. Human rights demand that such spaces promote pluralism, debate and dissent in which everyone can participate and contribute equally without fear or discrimination. In many societies, peace, social cohesion and inclusion depend on the level of understanding and reconciliation achieved between people and communities. It is crucial to ensure a multi-perspective approach in history teaching and memorialization pro-

² Ephraim Nimni, *Collective dimensions of the right to take part in cultural life*, E/C.12/40/17, p. 8-9



cesses in divided societies³, opening spaces to a variety of narratives and representations of that past, to promote a better understanding of contemporary challenges of exclusion and violence.

Multiple narratives of history are part of the right to access and enjoy cultural heritage implicit in the right to participate in cultural life: to maintain, exchange and develop cultural heritage; to benefit from the cultural heritage and creations of others. Cultural beliefs and understandings, values, normative rules and practices are continuously created, contested and (re)interpreted. The right to cultural heritage is not about the past; it is about the present and pathways to the future. Not only must people participate in identifying, interpreting and developing cultural heritage, designing and implementing preservation and safeguard policies and programmes, they must be able to decide which parts of cultural heritage are to be kept or modified. The right to participate in cultural life includes the right not to participate in any event, ritual or practice which undermines human dignity and rights. Individuals must be free to leave, rejoin or create new communities of shared cultural values without fear.

Cultural rights must be understood as relating to who in the community holds the power to define its collective identity and identify its cultural heritage⁴. Diversity exists within as well as between communities, and it is imperative to ensure that all persons participate and all voices, including those representing the interests, desires and perspectives of marginalised and vulnerable groups in particular, are heard on a basis of equality. For

³ See A/68/296 The Writing and Teaching of History (history textbooks) and A/HRC/25/49, Memorialisation Processes.

⁴ See A/HRC/17/38 The Right of Access to and Enjoyment of Cultural Heritage.

women, it is high time that the paradigm shift from culture as an obstacle to women's rights to ensuring the cultural rights of women and girls on a basis of equality with men and boys⁵. Women must be recognized as and supported to be equal spokespersons vested with the authority to determine which community traditions are to be respected, protected and transmitted to future generations, and which discarded. Youngsters must be given the space to innovate and contribute to continuously developing cultures, linked to the past and reaching for the future. Those marginalized must be brought from the peripheries to the centre of decision-making and planning.



The role of culture for sustainable development is crucial and depends on ensuring cultural rights for all.

An important cultural capability to be supported, especially amongst the marginalized and vulnerable, is that of “aspiring” for a better tomorrow. Aspirations embody people's conceptions of what constitutes a life of dignity. Aspirations are informed by, and in turn inform, communities of shared cultural values. New knowledge and innovations expand available options, strengthening the capacity to envisage a better future, for which access to specific technologies may be pivotal⁶.



Cultural rights have three essential and interdependent dimensions: creativity, access to cultural heritage and diversity.

A sustainable human-rights based approach to development is not achievable without taking culture and cultural rights fully into consideration. Cultural rights have three essential and interdependent dimensions: the first relates to free creativity, including promoting and protecting the freedom indispensable for artistic creativity⁷ and scientific inquiry; the second to people's right to access cultural heritage along with new thinking and developments; the third is diversity. All three are vital to developing sustainable and inclusive policies. They demand encouraging a multitude of perspectives, protecting people's right to express themselves freely, to challenge as well as enjoy cultural heritage while assuring the conditions necessary for everyone to continuously engage in critical thinking about themselves and the world they inhabit, and access to the opportunities and wherewithal to interrogate, investigate and contribute new knowledge, ideas, expressions and innovative applications, regardless of frontiers.

We should not pursue models of development that disrupt the cultural life of entire com-

⁵ See A/67/287, The Enjoyment of Cultural Rights by Women on a Basis of Equality with Men.

⁶ See A/HRC/20/26, The Right to Enjoy the Benefits of Scientific Progress and its Applications.

⁷ See A/HRC/23/34, The Right to Freedom of Artistic Expression and Creativity.



munities, destroy their cultural heritage and landscape, and deprive them of necessary resources, including in terms of savoir-faire and knowledge, to overcome challenges and build sustainable futures. Such policies disempower communities and exclude them from development processes.

An issue needing to be addressed, especially in urban environments, is the increasing impact of commercial advertising and marketing practices on our cultural and symbolic landscapes. People receive myriad mass commercial messages via a plethora of media, including intrusive and subliminal techniques, every day. This can deeply influence people's philosophical beliefs and aspirations, their cultural values and practices, from food consumption models to burial rituals, and beauty canons. The threat to cultural diversity, blurring of lines between commercial advertising versus other content, and seeming privileging of commercial messaging over artistic expressions in public spaces is of deep concern. States wishing to protect cultural diversity need to protect their societies from undue levels of advertising; ensure that public and civic spaces remain spheres for deliberation, cultural exchange, social cohesiveness and diversity - places for debate and discussion - and that artistic and other self-expressions are not crowded out by advertising⁸. We also need to take steps to assure that authors, rather than intermediaries, enjoy the moral and material benefits of their creations, as stipulated under human rights instruments - a subject I shall be taking up in my final reports.

Culture is increasingly acknowledged as a resource for development, especially for

⁸ See A/69/286 The impact of commercial advertising and marketing practices on the enjoyment of cultural rights.

maintaining and designing sustainable development models. It is vital, however, to guard against the unworkable “one-size-fits-all” models of development and to recognise that no particular area of the world or community holds all the answers. We should proactively benefit from local experiences rooted in traditional knowledge of harmony with nature, and address the challenges armed with our richly diverse knowledge and savoir-faire. We should respect, promote and protect people’s right to both enjoy and participate in artistic and scientific endeavours and to take part in decision-making about public spaces and funds in this regard.



For women, it is high time that the paradigm shift from culture as an obstacle to women’s rights to ensuring the cultural rights of women and girls on a basis of equality with men and boys.

Pursuing sustainable development in the face of global challenges makes it imperative to combine all our strengths, our creativity and eventually our dreams. While asking how culture can help to eradicate poverty and promote sustainable development, we must also ask how the Post 2015 development agenda, for example, can contribute to developing culture that manifests our common but complex humanity. This requires specific targets to promote cultural rights and indicators to assess (i) inclusiveness in planning and implementation; (ii) the ability of all to access, participate in, and contribute to cultural life as intrinsically joined to development.



We must ask how the Post-2015 development agenda can contribute to developing culture that manifests our common but complex humanity.

INTERNATIONAL AWARD “UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21”

The objective of the “International Award UCLG - MEXICO City - Culture 21” is to recognise leading cities and people that have distinguished themselves through their contribution to culture as a dimension of sustainable development. On the 31st of May 2014, the jury composed by Ing. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Gonzalo Carámbula, Dr Danielle Cliche, Catherine Cullen, and Dr Alicia Ziccardi held its last meeting for deliberating on the designation of a city among the 56 candidates and a winning personality. The Jury decided that the “Individual Award” be shared ex-aequo by Manuel Castells and Farida Shaheed. The Award ceremony took place in Mexico City (Mexico) on 12th November 2014.

WWW.AWARD.AGENDA21CULTURE.NET