

Report from Hangzhou, China: the UNESCO Congress on
“culture: key to sustainable development”

Day one: May 15, 2013



There is the inevitable excitement of the first day at an international gathering of this sort, with scholars and leaders from around the world arriving to one spot on the planet to discuss and debate on the critical issues of our times. This Congress is unique in that it is striving to put “Culture” into the broader interpretation of a sustainable life, emphasizing the process of creating culture, and not just the resulting ‘thing’. It is an emphasis on the *way* that culture is made instead of *what* it becomes. This is a very important shift for both a vision of sustainable education and sustainable development as a whole across the globe, as it puts emphasis on local and indigenous

culture as well as a truly sustainable model of fostering creativity.



The city of Hangzhou, with its 8.8 million people, is a perfect setting for this meeting, as it has been a cultural hub of China for over two thousand years. Famous for its gardens and waterways of the Westlake district (a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site), one is reminded daily of the theme of our work here: that 'heritage' is an enabler of culture, and culture in turn enables sustainable development. This is evident in the over 20,000 public cultural activities (free of charge) in the city last year alone.

In her opening remarks on Wednesday at the Plenary Session in the Zhejiang Peoples Great Hall, UNESCO's Director-General, Irena Bokova reminded us of the progress made since 1982 at the Mexico Conference in bringing culture into the sustainable development agenda. In the 15 years since Stockholm's 1998 Convention, the 'creation industries' have shown tangible results: in Asia, South America, and Africa their rate of growth is now in the double digits. She spoke of liberating our creative energy, encouraging dialogue, and placing our development goals on long term sites.

Although the word 'culture' was left out of the 2000 Millennium document, Culture is now increasing at the forefront of public policy. With only 1000 days left before the MDG's are re-evaluated, Ms. Bokova posed two questions: What have we learned since 2000?, and What Next? She stressed the importance of remembering that "no one size fits all", and that global target for all are hopeless. Our goals, she intoned, have not been *people-centered* enough. Ending on a positive note, the Director-General noted that the 18 major projects of the MDG's in place, have reached millions of people, helping to create tens of millions of jobs and remind us that "culture as a source of energy is endlessly renewable" .

In a ground-breaking speech for this country, (as confirmed privately later by friends with years of experience in China), Ms. Zhao Shaohua, the Vice-Minister of Culture, stressed the importance of opening the country to more cultural exchange and it's positive impact on the economy. The "Chinese Dream" was espoused by many of the Chinese officials at the Official Opening Plenary, citing the already 30% income climb of the Chinese people in recent years. The "5-Pronged Approach" to social/economic change here includes the phrase "Culture is a citizen's fundamental right". With 56 individual ethnic groups, this is a country to try and uphold that right, if any is.



His Highness the Aga Khan, Chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network and 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, presented an inspiring case study of the enormous cultural heritage preservation projects his foundation has done in the past two decades. But more than just development projects, they are sustainable in that they have each celebrated the cultural diversity of the region (be it Cairo, Zanzibar, or Afganistan) and emphasized the that cultural legacies can be catalysts for change in crisis situations and changing underdeveloped countries. “Cultural heritage can trampoline to economic stability” today, when culture and development are intrinsically linked. Not long ago the two were at odds. His Highness stressed the gap in the original MDG’s was because of the focus on outputs, and not process.

The President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, reminded us that the “cultural space is larger than the economic space”, and that a post-2015 framework must be sensitive to local culture. In talking about climate change we should also think about changing our thinking on how we produce and consume.

Petko Draganov, the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD, reported that the “Creative Economy”, goods and services based on indigenous economies, has been growing 10% annually, up to \$US 624 billion. These are often small family-owned businesses and small self-employed people. Women consist of one of the largest and fastest growing groups, as are youth and rural residents. One of the success stories internationally for the creative economy is Nollywood (Nigeria’s film industry), which has created over one million jobs and a \$US 500 million dollar/year business. These industries generally have environmental balance, and a sustainable use of resources.



The Hangzhou Agenda Draft Document sets out several clear actions to place culture at the heart of future policies for sustainable development, stressing that while important, the “Future We Want” document coming out of Rio+20 is not enough. Therefore today, at the final Plenary Session, the “Hangzhou Proclamation” will be put forth with these key points:

1. Integrate consideration of culture within all development policies and programmes
2. Build on culture to promote environmental sustainability and adapt to climate change
3. Use culture to strengthen resilience and adapt to climate change

4. Harness culture as a resource for achieving sustainable urban development and management
5. Harness the cultural capital to foster innovative models of cooperation and funding mechanisms
6. Foster peace and reconciliation through culture
7. Safeguard heritage and transmit it to future generations
8. Ensure free access to and participation in cultural life and respect for diversity for building inclusive and cohesive societies
9. Invest in cultural heritage and creative industries for poverty reduction and an inclusive economic development



the Future

The word “education” was used in nearly every panel discussion and debate during yesterday’s events. The level of interaction and dialogue has been extremely high, with scholarly input from long experienced academics, policy makers, cultural creators, and

government officials participating. Often passionate, when the discussion turned again to the roots and causes of our problems, some one would inevitably raise the cry “Education!”, usually repeating the word in a sequence of three times. While sustainable education will probably not make it into the Hangzhou Document per se, it is there for future Agendas that will come out of this one...when we get to the “RoadMap” stage.

The words of Olusegun Obasanjo, statesman and former Nigerian president summed up much of what this Congress is about. He said, (perhaps about his own country of 350 linguistic groups, civil war, and ecological disasters amok, as much as the international community) “Culture doesn’t divide as much as we think it does. What divides us are individual positions- which are superimposed on culture....socio-economic, political, etc.” He ended his inspired talk by reminding us that “it is education that removes barriers”.

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