



## ADVOCACY PAPER

### THEME: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND OWNERSHIP: RESHAPING MINDSETS

Sub-theme 3: Human Capital - Culture and Heritage,  
Unleashing the Potential

## 1. BACKGROUND

The Africa Dialogue Series 2021 (ADS 2021) is being held under the overall theme of “Cultural identity and ownership: reshaping mindsets”. The selection of this theme is aligned with the African Union’s theme for 2021, “Arts, Culture and Heritage: a lever for building the Africa we want,” which seeks to consolidate and support the growth and recognition of Africa’s cultural and artistic riches as a common unifying foundation that can galvanize the common will of the African people, those of the continent as well as those of the diaspora<sup>1</sup>.

Africa is a continent with rich and diverse culture and heritage, both in tangible and intangible forms. About 2,000 languages are estimated to be spoken in Africa, and there is a total of 137 properties registered as world heritage in 42 African countries<sup>2</sup>. These tangible elements of cultural heritage – monuments, sites and buildings – across the continent demonstrate Africa’s long human history since its origins, such as the Maropeng and Sterkfontein Caves and Olduvai Gorge. Intangible forms of arts and culture – music, performance, dance, oral histories, theatre and cuisine – constitute essential parts of everyday lives of African people.

Africa is also the world’s youngest continent with around 60 per cent of the population of 1.3 billion under age 25 in 2019. This youth bulge could provide immense opportunities for Africa to accelerate its socioeconomic development. On the other hand, Africa’s human resources, in particular youth and women, are yet to be fully developed and exploited to promote Africa’s development. According to the World Bank’s Human Capital Index, Africa’s Index score in 2019 was 0.4 compared to a global average of 0.57<sup>3</sup>, indicating that children born today in Africa will be only 40 per cent as productive as they could have been with full human capital endowments.

## 2. KEY ISSUES FOR TRANSFORMATION AND THE WAY FORWARD

Culture and heritage play a key role in contributing to unlock the potential of African people and the development of a strong African cultural identity, ownership, innovation and creativity. The transformative power of culture, tradition and customs for human capital development – either in education, health, social protection and inclusion and job creation, among others – has been increasingly recognized as a critical enabler for sustainable development. Traditional knowledge and skills are also important for sustainable environmental management while promoting socioeconomic development.

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1 African Union Press Release, “34th AU Summit strives to ensure that, as a continental body, no country is left behind in the COVID-19 responses “as we enhance integration,” 6 February 2021

2 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/?search=>

3 Africa Human Capital Plan, the World Bank (2019)

Within the framework of the ADS 2021, a high-level conversation of academic experts was held on the theme “Human Capital - Culture and Heritage, unleashing the potential”. To fully leverage rich and diverse African traditional, indigenous and cultural knowledge, skills and know-how to strengthen African human capital and promote development of the continent, the experts highlighted the following key issues to be considered for action.

### **First, overcome the burdensome legacy of colonialism**

In order to unlock the potential of Africa’s human capital, it is necessary to reset our mindsets. Colonialism not only impacted Africa’s economic wealth. It also imposed a heavy, although sometimes invisible, burden on African culture by diminishing it as something exotic or primitive. Embracing Africa’s rich and diverse arts, culture and heritage is a first step toward capitalizing on these precious assets for the promotion of sustainable development in the continent and the strengthening of its human capital. In this regard, it is important to enlarge non-formal cultural education settings, in particular, to multiply the opportunities to learn and preserve the intangible assets of Africa’s tradition and culture.

- Culture is fundamentally a set of behaviours, traditions, expressions and interactions among the members of a society and their environment. Colonialism was based on the premise that modernity could only come through the abandonment of Africa’s traditions and the adoption of the culture of the colonial power. However, imported cultures have failed to bring prosperity and development to the African continent. Restoring traditional culture to its rightful place will provide African countries a set of tools for interacting with their environment based on the continent’s own history. Furthermore, promoting research on African culture and heritage, advancing cultural rights, developing Africa’s creative and cultural industries will trigger a change of mindset and multiply the possibilities of creating innovative approaches to Africa’s challenges based on the continent’s reality and history.
- Strengthening human capital requires a reinforced approach to education systems as a vehicle to strengthen the awareness about Africa’s cultural wealth. In formal education, some initiatives could include, among others, the use of African languages in primary and secondary education, increasing classes on African arts, culture, history and heritage, and promoting the inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary curriculum on culture and heritage in tertiary education.
- Similar initiatives could also be promoted in other areas of research and informal education. These include, among others, combining research and the study of tangible and intangible forms of African traditional and cultural inheritance, restoring repositories of traditional and indigenous knowledge and skills, emphasizing the importance of oral history-telling across generations and using non-formal spaces for cultural education.

## **Second, promote an inclusive approach to unleash the potential of Africa's human capital and leverage its own traditional knowledge, skills and assets with a view to promoting sustainable development**

It is critical to nurture a sense of Pan-African cultural unity within the continent's diversity, including the diaspora, which promotes social cohesion, inclusivity and cross-border and intergenerational exchange and collaboration. Youth, women and marginalized people should be given priorities to unleash their vast potentials and contribute to Africa's sustainable development.

- Pan-African values need to be embedded in training at all levels to unlock the potential of human resources in Africa and reinforce their self-esteem. This could include a Pan-African programme for training and research. African tradition, customs and historical assets need to benefit all African people, while African people should invest more in their own traditional and customary goods and services. This includes promoting mutual cultural learning and cultural tourism within the African continent.
- It is important to recognize the role of youth as custodians of Africa's tradition and inheritance and as agents for advancing creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. In this respect, it is necessary to reinforce the capacity of youth to leverage new and innovative technology, in particular digital tools, for content creation, development and preservation to sustain and stimulate African culture and heritage.
- It is critical that Africa recognizes culture and heritage as an integral part of human development and finds synergy between African cultural perspective, rationale and philosophies and national, regional and global development programmes. Africa's viewpoint for its own sustainable development could be further stimulated through critical reasoning and thinking, reinforced reflection of Africa's culture and heritage, and inclusive participation of all African people including youth, women and marginalized groups as well as the diaspora.