



## CONCEPT NOTE

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

Sub-theme III: Human Capital: culture and heritage unleashing the potential

Friday 28 May 2021  
10:00am to 12:00pm (EST)

## I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Africa Dialogue Series 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 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. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that about 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa<sup>2</sup>. There is a total of 137 properties inscribed on the World Heritage List (89 cultural, 41 natural and 7 mixed properties) in 42 African countries<sup>3</sup>. These tangible cultural heritages – 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. Natural heritages – parks, natural reserves, valleys and falls that have scientific, social and aesthetic significance – preserve an oasis for wildlife. Intangible forms of arts and culture – music, performance, dance, oral histories, folklore, festivals, religions, fashion and cuisine – constitute essential parts of everyday lives of African people. Cultural and traditional leaders have made important contributions to advance the continent, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and Miriam Makeba.

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, including through harnessing the demographic dividend. On the other hand, Africa’s human capital is 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>4</sup> The index, which is measured by survival to age five, learning-adjusted years of school and health (stunting and adult survival), shows that children born today in Africa will be only 40 per cent as productive as they could have been with full human capital endowments.

Culture and heritage play a key role in contributing to the unlocking of human capital and in the development of strong African cultural identity, ownership, innovation and creativity. The transformative power of culture and heritage for human development – either in education, health, social protection and inclusion and job

---

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 <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/languages-in-africa/>

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

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

creation, among others – has been increasingly recognized as a critical enabler for sustainable development. For instance, Nigeria’s media and entertainment industry, “Nollywood”, has overtaken Hollywood and become the second-largest film producer in the world in terms of number of movies and employs about a million people, providing opportunities for developing human capital<sup>5</sup>. According to the International Centre for Research and Documentation on African Traditions and Languages (CERDOTOLA), a value chain of manioc in Côte d’Ivoire, which is an example of culturally sustainable industrial transformation, based on traditional knowledge and technology,<sup>6</sup> accounts for on average approximately \$1.2 billion per year and provides 425,000 jobs.<sup>7</sup> The agricultural, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, music, fashion and many other industries could leverage indigenous and traditional knowledge and skills. In order to further capitalize on rich traditional knowledge and skills, it is critical to invest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education in Africa. Similarly, to safeguard and take advantage of traditional skills and knowledge as well as cultural creativity and innovation, it is essential to create an enabling environment for all entrepreneurs to have easy access to information and knowledge on the intellectual property rights (IPR). Traditional knowledge and skills are also important for sustainable environmental management while promoting socioeconomic development.

The United Nations and the African Union provide various policy instruments to safeguard and promote culture and heritage. At global level, seven UNESCO cultural conventions are intended to safeguard and nurture specific aspects of culture and creativity, the diversity of cultural expressions and creative industries, and the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods.<sup>8</sup> At regional level, African Union policy instruments<sup>9</sup> provide guidance in promoting the contribution of culture to the integration of society as well as to socioeconomic development, including through improving human capital. Further, a number of continental initiatives, such

---

5 <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/nigeria-media-and-entertainment-industry-nollywood-and-nigerian-music>

6 Professor Charles Binam Bikoi, the Executive Secretary of the Centre International de Recherche et de Documentation sur les traditions et les langues Africaine (CERDOTOLA). CERDOTOLA introduces a concept “Industradition” which is culturally sustainable industrial transformation based on traditional knowledge, technology and know-how.

7 Ibid.

8 These conventions include the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

9 These policy instruments include the Cultural Charter for Africa (1978), the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance (2006), the Revised African Union Plan of Action on Cultural and Creative Industries (2008); the Statute of the African Audio-Visual and Cinema Commission (2019), and the AU Model Law on the Protection of Cultural Property and Heritage (2018).

as the development of a continental policy on arts education by the African Union Commission and African Union Development Agency and the establishment of the Great Museum of Africa, will provide prospects to further advance the human capital agenda in Africa.

The United Nations and the African Union also fully recognize the role of culture and heritage as catalysts for human development in contributing to socioeconomic development and advancement of African integration. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union's Agenda 2063 provide roadmaps for safeguarding and developing culture and heritage through the majority of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG11 on "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", as well as through Aspiration 5 of Agenda 2063, "An Africa with a Strong Cultural Identity, Common Heritage, Values and Ethics." Aspiration 5, Goal 16 highlights the promotion of values and ideals of Pan-Africanism, cultural values and African renaissance, and cultural heritage, creative arts and businesses, all of which are part of human capital. Furthermore, the United Nations General Assembly resolution on Culture and Sustainable Development<sup>10</sup> reaffirms the role of culture as an enabler of sustainable development, while UNESCO's Culture 2030 indicators provide an important initiative to measure the progress of culture's enabling contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Despite all these efforts to promote culture and heritage as one of the principal drivers for improving human capital and promoting sustainable development, various challenges remain. For instance, in assessing progress in the implementation of Goal 16, the African Union's First Continental Progress Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063 (2020) indicated that the aggregate total score of the continent revealed a poor performance, recording a low score of 12 per cent. This was largely due to weak integration of indigenous African culture, values and language into primary and secondary schools' curricula and partly due to a lack of relevant data. Moreover, while the African Union adopted the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance in 2006, the process of ratification and signature has been sluggish with only 14 and 33 member States having undertaken these steps, respectively. Indeed, despite its wealth and diversity, the continent's human capital is yet to be fully harnessed and has difficulty being fully considered in the continent's development strategies.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on cultural and heritage industries in Africa mainly due to social distancing and travel restriction policies. At the same time, it highlighted important roles that African culture, tradition and heritage play in promoting human development through sensitizing the population on public health issues, using traditional medicines as potential remedies for health challenges as well as mitigating the social and mental health impacts of the pandemic. Policy makers may need to take into account the role culture plays in the way people conceptualize health to ensure that relevant policies reflect particular briefs and needs of their target population. The pandemic also paved the way to advance a new and innovative approach to promote African culture and heritage, in particular, through using digital technology to unlock the potential of human capital, especially for youth, women and marginalized groups in remote areas.

---

<sup>10</sup> A/RES/74/230 on 19 December 2019

Against this backdrop, two roundtable sessions by eminent African academics and experts were held and broadcasted prior to the Public Policy Forum to analyze and address the existing challenges as well as to provide recommendations to establish prerequisites necessary to unleash the potential of human capital in Africa. The main discussion points included the following.

- African academics and experts highlighted the necessity to change the continent's narrative, transform the mindset of African people, leaving behind colonial legacies while moving towards recognizing the importance of Africa's own culture and heritage. These transformations could be achieved through promoting research on shared African cultural and heritage roots, advancing cultural rights and developing new narratives based on new knowledge production emanating from African values.
- To promote African culture and heritage, the strong engagement of local communities and young professional is essential, while eliminating inequality. The role of youth as custodians of Africa's culture and tradition and agents for advancing creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship was particularly emphasized. The need for establishing effective partnerships to promote investment in African human capital was also underlined.
- In order to unlock the potential of African people, in particular youth and women, it was recommended that curriculum and educational systems be renewed. This includes using African languages in primary and secondary education, increasing classes on African culture and history in formal education, promoting the inter-disciplinary curriculum on culture and heritage in tertiary education, combining research and the study of tangible and intangible culture, restoring repositories of knowledge and using non-formal spaces for cultural education, and promoting restitution or return of cultural property and heritage for educational purpose.
- The need for nurturing a sense of Pan-African cultural unity within the continent's diversity, including its diaspora, was highlighted to promote social cohesion, inclusivity and cross-border collaboration.
- The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on culture and heritage industries as well as positive contributions of the latter to address the pandemic-related challenges were widely recognized. Leveraging new and innovative technology, in particular digital tools, to promote African culture was emphasized.
- It was underscored that Africa needs to recognize culture and tradition as an integral part of human capital development, and find synergy between African cultural perspective, rationale and philosophies and national, regional and global development agendas to effectively promote Africa's socioeconomic development. .

## II. OBJECTIVES

Building on two above-mentioned roundtable discussions of African academics, the Public Policy Forum provides a global platform for participants, including United Nations Member States and system entities, African institutions and academia, civil society organizations, media and the private sector to further exchange experiences and opinions to generate new ideas and develop concrete policy proposals to:

- Create and promote new narratives on African culture and heritage and the ways to ensure their transmission to the next generation;
- Leverage rich African culture and heritage to unleash the potential of human capital in Africa, in particular, women, youth and marginalized groups as agents for transformation and development; and
- Capitalize on African cultural and traditional assets to provide social and economic opportunities to African people, with a view to recovering forward better from the pandemic and promoting culturally sustainable implementation of the 2030 and 2063 Agendas.

## III. KEY QUESTIONS

- Which policies are needed to promote a sense of Pan-African unity with respect to African culture, tradition and heritage, while respecting diversity and working to eliminate inequality?
- How can African cultural education and training systems be revitalized and harnessed to promote human development on the continent? Similarly, how can STEM education and IPR knowledge of youth and entrepreneurs be reinforced to promote cultural and heritage industries in Africa?
- How can the international community including the United Nations system enhance its support for African efforts to unleash the potential of human capital through leveraging its culture and heritage?
- How could African Member States leverage the 2020 Continental's Digital Transformation Strategy (2020-2030) to further develop the opportunities provided by the cultural and creative economies for sustainable development, as well as key soft power tools promoting social and cultural values for the continent?

More information at:

[www.un.org/osaa/ads2021](http://www.un.org/osaa/ads2021)