

9 July 2021

Excellency,

I have the honour to share herewith the summary of the High-level Event on Culture and Sustainable Development “Building back better: towards a more resilient and impactful culture sector throughout COVID-19 and the Decade of Action” held in the General Assembly Hall, on Friday, 21 May 2021, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 74/320 of 16 January 2020 entitled “Culture and Sustainable Development”.

The summary highlights key messages and discussions from Member States, the United Nations system and other stakeholders. I sincerely hope the summary will benefit our efforts in leveraging the transformative potential of culture as an underused accelerator for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I once again take this opportunity to thank all Member States for your proactive engagement and building strong momentum around strengthening a more resilient and impactful cultural sector to build back better. It is crucial to translate our commitments and visions during this discussion into concrete and accelerated actions.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.



Volkan BOZKIR

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York



High-Level Event on Culture and Sustainable Development



“Building back better: towards a more resilient and impactful
culture sector throughout COVID-19 and the Decade of Action”

21 May 2021

Summary of the President of the General Assembly



INTRODUCTION

The President of the General Assembly (PGA), H.E. Mr. Volkan BOZKIR convened a High-level Event on [Culture and Sustainable Development](#) in the General Assembly Hall, on Friday, 21 May 2021, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 74/320 of 16 January 2020 entitled “Culture and Sustainable Development”. The High-level Event was convened under the theme ***“Building back better: towards a more resilient and impactful culture sector throughout COVID-19 and the Decade of Action”***. The Event aimed to highlight the transformative potential of culture as an underused accelerator for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and shared best practices and policy adaptations needed to ensure the cultural and creative industries’ contributions to COVID-19 relief and recovery strategies.

The Event ([programme](#)) consisted of an Opening Segment; three panel discussions on “Mainstreaming culture into sustainable development through partnerships”, “The Status of Artists, Cultural Professionals and Organizations: Equitable Digital Transformation to Support COVID-19 Recovery”, and “Achieving Culture’s Transformative Potential to Accelerate the Decade of Action”; a High-level Plenary and a Call to Action.

KEY MESSAGES

- The 2030 Agenda acknowledges the cultural and natural diversity of the world and recognizes all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development.
- The Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) account for 3% of the global economy, generating 2.25 trillion USD annually and supporting 30 million jobs worldwide. They are the largest sectors providing employment for young people aged 15-29 than any other sector. Cultural exports are valued at over \$250 billion annually.
- Despite their size, value and influence, CCIs are often underrepresented in policies and fiscal decisions, including COVID-19 recovery and adaptation packages. These sectors’ contributions to the SDGs are vastly underestimated.
- Policy changes are required to secure artists and cultural workers, human, social and economic rights. A key starting point is the alignment of CCIs with the SDGs to be more equal, fair, free from all forms of discrimination and injustice.
- The General Assembly’s designation of 2021 as “the International Year of the Creative Economy” is intended to expand the creative economy’s contribution to job creation and entrepreneurship, and support developing countries’ transition, and to highlight its added value to sectors such as sustainable tourism, performing arts and heritage conservation activities.
- Capitalizing on the creative economy’s potential can help diversify countries’ production and exports while supporting sustainable development. Addressing the precarious status of artists, cultural professionals and organizations – often underfunded, and working on informal, part time or freelance bases – and taking into account the impact, opportunities and challenges of the digital environment, will be central to these efforts.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a new chapter with full acknowledgement of the power of culture in realizing the 2030 Agenda.
- Member States called for:
 - i. increased policy dialogue and exchange on best practices, and measures to strengthen creative economies
 - ii. improved evidence-based cultural policy informed by robust cultural data and indicator framework

- iii. enhanced synergies between culture and education to ensure sustainable cultural career paths and the development of talent support policies and best practices
 - iv. improved efforts to leverage technological advancements and knowledge transfer in support of cultural economies, including through the enhancement of intellectual property protections and required frameworks to support increased cultural activities in digital platforms, and
 - v. strengthened regional and global cooperation, strategic partnerships and increased resource mobilization for the promotion of culture for sustainable development.
- The private sector has a key role in driving the partnerships to harness cultural resources, heritage and creative sector as a transformative pathway for the Decade of Action.

OPENING SEGMENT REMARKS

H.E. Mr. Volkan BOZKIR, President of the General Assembly¹: Culture is central for social cohesion and finding meaning and purpose through artistic and historical reflection. The value and influence of the cultural and creative sectors is often overlooked and not reflected in policies and fiscal decisions, including COVID-19 recovery and adaptation packages. Due to a lack of data, these sectors' contribution to the SDGs are vastly underestimated. Millions of workers in the creative fields remain underemployed or unemployed, often unable to access stimulus funds from the pandemic, or being overlooked in other forms of support. Similarly, the loss or absence of digital connectivity hindered their ability to work. The PGA emphasized that creative sectors should be prioritized to receive the necessary tools for their success including, comprehensive and up-to-date data to measure and assess their contributions towards the three dimensions of sustainable development. The International Year of the Creative Economy (IYEC), established by General Assembly resolution 74/198, presents the opportunity to expand the creative economy's contribution to job creation and entrepreneurship, and support developing countries' transition, and to highlight its added value to sectors such as sustainable tourism, performing arts and heritage conservation activities. The PGA encouraged all to utilize the high-level event and this entire year to support the foundations of a transformational year for culture to expand partnerships for culture.

H.E. Mr. Munir Akram, President of the Economic and Social Council²: Cultural dimensions influenced the way countries perceived the pandemic and thus the speed and ambition of the response of governments. Culture impacts the way people define prosperity, well-being, and equality, as well as their attitudes towards work, the environment and international solidarity. Natural and cultural diversity of the can contribute to sustainable development. Yet cultural differences impact political relations between states and communities, which are seen in such phenomena as migrations and refugee crisis. Amb. Akram highlighted that many misperceptions of states' behaviors arise from a lack of understanding of other cultures. Promotion of mutual coexistence requires building bridges, not burning them, as well as respecting each other's norms, morals and ethos. Irrespective of our diversity, it is in our enlightened self-interest to avoid

¹ <https://www.un.org/pga/75/2021/05/21/high-level-event-on-culture-and-sustainable-development-5/>

² <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org.ecosoc/files/files/en/president/2021/statement-ecosoc-president-21-may-2021.pdf>

denigration of diverse cultures, eliminate discriminations and combat incitements to violence. The value of culture is universal and timeless, yet engagement with cultural diversity must enhance cooperation in harmony.

Sir Richard Curtis, Secretary-General's Special Advocate for the SDGs: Arts and culture can change the world and are incredibly important to the joy and self-knowledge of nations, and they are included in SDGs 4, 8, 11 and 17. The SDGs need artists and communicators to fulfill that promise. The arts have been crucial to spread the Goals far and wide, igniting them in people's imagination, and their application in daily lives. Arts, artists and culture endlessly represent life and the truth of injustice and were crucial to the fights against slavery and racism. Sir Curtis outlined the relevance of making cultural industries more aligned with the SDGs, more equal, more fair, free from all forms of discrimination and injustice. He concluded by reflecting on the implications of transformative policy changes which can secure artists and cultural workers, human, social and economic rights.

PANEL 1: MAINSTREAMING CULTURE INTO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

This panel discussion focused on mainstreaming culture into SDG implementation plans across the social, economic and environmental pillars in the UN system; building global solidarity and partnerships for culture; and the formulation of national and regional strategies to ensure culture is at the heart of sustainable post-pandemic recovery plans.

Mainstreaming

Panelists underscored the importance of SDG 11.4 as a prerequisite to achieve sustainable development. In this context, they termed culture as a foundation, an asset, and a tool to be nurtured and protected and not be taken for granted. The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered cultural resources and creative industries more relevant than ever, as a lifeline for people in lockdown.

They highlighted that [the Culture 2030 Indicators](#)³ demonstrate the interlinkages between culture and all 17 SDGs to support their implementation. In particular, linking culture and education can improve learning outcomes, foster quality education, including the most vulnerable communities. Further efforts are needed to document measures and demonstrate the impact of culture on sustainable development, including through its integration in Voluntary National Reviews.

Panelists referenced the UNESCO-World Bank [“Cities, Culture, Creativity: Leveraging Culture & Creativity for Sustainable Urban Development & Inclusive Growth”](#) report⁴ findings. The report noted that intangible and tangible culture are the common denominator that bonds people together which helps to set people-based and place-based strategies, integrating culture and creativity into post-crisis recovery processes. Culture has proven to be a lever to communicate engagement, social inclusion, resilience and reconciliation. Countries require comprehensive support to develop a global approach to culture across the different domains. In this regard, participants called for the elevation of and an integrated approach to policy dialogues and advocacy on culture at the global, regional and local levels. Participatory, transparent approaches inclusive of a diversity of

³ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culture2030indicators/>

⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/publication/cities-culture-creativity>

stakeholders across all sectors, at all stages of policy processes are essential. For evidence-based policy making in the field of culture.

Recommendations were proffered for building the capacities of local authorities on the importance of cultural and creative assets, to identify and address the constraints that prevent cultural industries from flourishing, in relation to skills, infrastructure, strengthening local networks leveraging digital environments, as well as building local coalitions including creative actors. Within this context, national and local post-recovery plans can benefit for a cultural and creative industries perspective.

Recognizing the intersections between culture and climate action, participants called on the international community to safeguard cultural heritage from climate change by including culture in adaptation and mitigation strategies, exploiting technologies and creativity towards more sustainable lifestyles, and contribute to the objectives of the Paris Agreement. The pre-COP 26 in Milan and COP 26 in Glasgow are opportunities to demonstrate culture's contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation that must not be missed.

Partnership

Strategic partnerships at the global level help cities catalyze actions to nurture cultural and creative industries. [The Creative Cities Network](https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home)⁵ was showcased as an innovative platform to exchange on topics such as on housing, skill development, finance, digital platforms and articulate collective reflections and tailored solutions specific to cities themselves to respond to challenges such as resilience and economic competitiveness. Furthermore, participants noted the launch of the “[Resiliart](https://en.unesco.org/news/resiliart-artists-and-creativity-beyond-crisis)”⁶ movement, and the UN Inter-agency Platform on culture and sustainable development could help to reach consensus within the UN system to build back better through culture.

Such partnerships can build creative and innovative skills to enable cultural actors to connect with some of the digital tools, immersive experiences, business models, as well as the indigenous practices in environmental and land management, create social behaviors, integrate design and creativity into urban planning.

Participants explored multidisciplinary and multisectoral approaches to build partnerships between regional and local stakeholders, including private sector and philanthropic organizations as part of the mainstreaming of culture into SDG implementation and policy formulation. The COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant response via stimulus packages has raised political awareness to strengthen these partnerships that will contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in a more powerful way, driven by culture.

In addition, panelists noted the need to strengthen the [United4Culture](https://www.unite4heritage.org/en/unite4heritage-celebrating-safeguarding-cultural-heritage)⁷ partnership to address the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage by violent extremist groups.

Recovery

In many countries, Creatives have spent the past year in lockdown, creating new products and experimenting with internet platforms in preparation for a reopening grounded in building back better. Policymakers must support capacity building to ensure that societies

⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/news/resiliart-artists-and-creativity-beyond-crisis>

⁷ <https://www.unite4heritage.org/en/unite4heritage-celebrating-safeguarding-cultural-heritage>

have the right creative and innovation skills across sectors. These skills are what make us human and less susceptible to disruption caused by automation.

PANEL 2: THE STATUS OF ARTISTS, CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS AND ORGANIZATIONS: EQUITABLE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION TO SUPPORT COVID-19 RECOVERY

This panel discussion focused on policy changes relating to the social and economic rights of artists, cultural professionals and organizations to ensure fair remuneration and diverse cultural expressions in the digital environment, and solutions to leverage the potential of innovation for the sustainable development of the creative economy. Discussions were also framed around the future of the cultural sector in light of the COVID-19 reality.

All participants noted that greater investment is required in not only physical and digital infrastructure, but also in cultural infrastructure, which must be open and creative and nurture hope, imagination, security and drive us towards common good.

Participants called for the creation of legislation that allow equal opportunities for all cultural actors; diversity in digital media and online platforms to prevent monopolization and support innovation; and recognition of the status of the artist, backed by respect and dignity.

The pandemic has sharply exposed the fragility of the cultural sector. Panelists noted that while access and travel restrictions have been imposed, digital media have opened a door for increased mobilization and expression for those with the tools to adapt. Participants stressed the necessity of ending the digital divide so that no one is excluded from cultural life online. Massive digitalization coupled with emerging technologies, such as virtual tools, can create new forms of cultural experience and new business models with market potential. Enabling artists to generate incomes from their digital content require protecting copyrights and transparent dealing of commissions to respective copyright holders and artists. Doing so is vital to achieving culture's potential as a growth engine, in particular for Least Developed Countries. South-South partnership and shared learning were highlighted as key.

PANEL 3: ACHIEVING CULTURE'S TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL TO ACCELERATE THE DECADE OF ACTION

This panel shared national experiences and best practices in integrating CCIs into national sustainable development plans, including via data collection, public consultations and diverse funding mechanisms. Participants identified bottlenecks to progress and explored solutions. In the context of the International Year of Creative Economy, they discussed the crisis-response measures needed to safeguard the creative economy during the pandemic, and factors hindering their effectiveness. Panelists also identified policy measures protecting CCIs throughout the pandemic, in order to: (i) ignite their transformative potential for the Decade of Action; (ii) create robust data systems for culture to better assess CCIs' contribution to economies and the SDGs, and best inform policymakers and implementation strategies; and (iii) strengthen the funding mechanisms to support the creative industries as a driver of sustainable development.

Data

Participants highlighted the need for more reliable and quality data, and a comprehensive data mapping of the cultural sector. The ongoing crisis exemplified the risk of undocumented and unquantified created value chain, leading to an under evaluation of the culture and creative sectors and insufficient state support. Notwithstanding, participants recognized that data collection comes with challenges caused by coexistence of formal and informal activities, as well as a variety of definitions and concepts. The existing methodological tools often prove insufficient to understand culture in its specificity and the scope of its contribution to other fields of public policy and to the objectives of sustainable development.

Discussion on data systems require key consideration of the great disparities between national statistical capacities, the need for data aggregation and internationally comparable indicators. In order to reduce the fragmentation across policy domains, it is important to highlight the linkages and intersections between cultural and other policy areas. In this regard, participants acknowledged the importance of data generating by the reporting mechanisms of the UNESCO culture conventions.

Panelists shared practices of data collection in support of the SDGs, including [the Green Production Guide](#)⁸ reporting mechanism to green the film and television industries. New kinds of collaborations are essential to collect, share and engage with sustainability data, and adapt to local contexts. Matching sustainability experts with artists is an opportunity which can unlock data for different sectors.

Funding

Panelists underscored that the main concerns over the next five years will be the structural stability of the creative and culture industries, and the institutional capacity needed to respond to those changes. There was a strong call to embrace this disruption as an opportunity to adapt and adopt policies that invest in employment skills, knowledge development and talent.

The importance of public investment in culture was stressed as absolutely essential. The funding ecosystem for the sector requires greater diversity and variation to respond to the various cultural domains and capacities.

Panelists also underscored that the success to building back better, will be premised on addressing existing issues as a fundamental first step. Reference was made to the sector-specific concept of “double-unemployment”, which refers to the many people who lost their jobs in the cultural sector as well as their second jobs, generally in tourism, retail, hospitality, which they rely on to enable their participation in the creative sector. In the wake of this crisis, looking at the question of minimum wage, social safety nets, health care support is essential.

Participants called for the full inclusion of culture in every national recovery and resilience plan and recommended dedicating at least 2% of their recovery funding for culture.

⁸ <https://www.greenproductionguide.com/about-pga-green/>

Policymakers were also urged to continuously involve and engage local cultural communities in the design and implementation of recovery plans.

Taking into the consideration the immense number of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in the sector for which the risks are greatest, a differentiated approach should be considered moving forward. This becomes even more relevant based on a recent “[COVID-19, culture and cultural rights](#)” report by the United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, which warned that COVID-19 may lead to a global cultural catastrophe with severe long-lasting consequences for human rights.⁹

Culture and environment

The pandemic has brought a high level of consciousness to the culture and environment nexus. Experiences were shared in relation to production of art and films, television, music and festivals. Considerations must be made in relation to environmental impact, regulations and disclosure of materials, and certification standards.

HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY¹⁰

The high-level plenary comprised statements by 42 Member States. Leaders called for accelerated action on mainstreaming culture into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda as an important piece for containing COVID-19, and as a starting point to building back better. Member States demonstrated ambition and urgency of action while reflecting on the fundamental nature of the principle of leaving no one behind. Experiences and lessons were shared on promoting the development of CCIs at the national, regional, and global levels and accelerating concrete actions through multilateral cooperation.

Culture and Sustainable Development

Member States acknowledged the importance of culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development. Culture is an essential component of human development representing a source of identity, innovation, prosperity and creativity for the individual and the community.

Sustainable development, seen as the solution for the future of humanity, cannot be achieved only by economic growth but must embrace respect for people, nature and culture. Culture constitutes a driving force for economic development, encompassing a diversity of productive activities and contributes in particular to strengthening local economies. It has long been an attractive means for revenue generation, poverty reduction, job creation, urban development and most importantly social cohesion. From a human-centered perspective, culture-driven development enables greater social inclusiveness, ownership of communities, improvement of living conditions, use of local resources and empowerment of individuals.

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CulturalRights/Pages/Covid19.aspx>

¹⁰ National remarks submitted to “E-statements” are available on:

<https://journal.un.org/en/meeting/officials/41462dc8-a1ac-eb11-911e-0050569e8b67/2021-05-21>

<https://journal.un.org/en/meeting/officials/40462dc8-a1ac-eb11-911e-0050569e8b67/2021-05-21>

The High-level Event’s recording is available on:

<https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/2621/2621430/>

<https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/2621/2621452/>

The cultural and creative industries contribute significantly to gross domestic product. In this regard and in recognition of the importance of CCIs in achieving the 2030 Agenda, and Agenda 2063, [the African Union declared the year 2021 as the Year of Art, Culture and Heritage](#).¹¹ This was the focus for the 2021 Africa Dialogue Series.

The ethos of harmony with nature is embedded in various cultures and should be optimized for its contribution to culture as a driver of sustainable development. The integration of cultural aspects in the economy, including tourism, arts and entertainment industry, is important to accelerate sustainable development.

Cultural diversity

Member States underscored that culture represents the shared values and unique identities of communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has however made it difficult for countries to communicate and engage in diversity-embracing exchanges. As a result, collective aspirations to create a state of harmonious cultural diversity are in peril. To overcome this crisis and achieve sustainable development, raising awareness of cultural diversity and work to secure diversity in the culture sector.

Culture must be promoted to embrace diversity, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. Commemoration of the International Year of Creative Economy, the role of cultural sectors, particularly artists and cultural professionals, for a resilient recovery cannot be overstressed. The international community needs to support developing countries in utilizing their sectors to diversify production.

Member States considered international cooperation as an essential factor for the strengthening of the new model of creative economy, the solidarity-based management of knowledge and innovation, thus accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and achievement of the SDGs.

Challenges

Member States highlighted the challenges to the CCIs in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. The culture sector employs globally around 30 million people and is now struggling to stay on its feet. Around the world, the livelihood of artists has been profoundly affected by restrictions. Many people left the sector with no other source of income. Internet-based culture, however, cannot be considered a replacement for more traditional culture representations. Some important forms of culture are dependent on intangible materials.

The cultural sector in Africa is exposed to a number of threats and challenges, including climate change, limited infrastructures and financial resources, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic triggered a change in social behavior, affecting African traditional social norms.

The pandemic has caused social and economic impact on the tourism industry, including the thousands of livelihoods it sustains. This has provided space to rethink how tourism interacts with other economic sectors and our resources and natural systems.

¹¹ <https://au.int/en/theme/2021/arts-culture-and-heritage#:~:text=In%20recognition%20of%20the%20importance,Building%20the%20Africa%20We%20Want%E2%80%9D>.

Member States called for dialogues and promotion of best practices among nations as important tools for a global solution to overcome the challenges faced in the cultural and creative industries.

Recovery and resilience

While the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened progress towards achieving the SDGs, it is nonetheless an opportunity to heed the lessons learned to ensure inclusive, sustainable, green and transformative COVID-19 recovery. The power of culture can be a source of resilience, creativity and social cohesion. Cultural considerations are key to the crisis response and recovery, to build back better, more inclusive and sustainable with the potential to generate income, create decent jobs and promote trade, while enhancing cultural diversity and human development and welfare.

There is a need to find creative and innovative ways of designing and managing our economies which includes empowering youth and women, enhance small and medium enterprises and technological innovation. A key thrust for building back better is the inclusion of environmental concerns into cultural policies. Culture can raise awareness on the complex challenges of climate change and identify new solutions to tackle the climate crisis. Artists and cultural institutions play an important role in inspiring environmental actions.

Member States upheld that appropriate legislation and investment in the sector encourages cultural and creative activities to thrive in enabling environments which in turn sustain jobs for artists and cultural professionals. The growth of the cultural and creative economy has to be facilitated by the expansion of suitable education for knowledge building, the provision of sufficient and appropriate cultural infrastructure, enabling and encouraging production and consumption and guaranteeing a wider market of cultural and creative goods and services. Such efforts need a stronger collaboration and sharing among all countries around the world.

Several Member States introduced their best practices and efforts to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the creative sector. These included the provision of financial support and incentives to impacted creatives and enterprises, and collaboration with UNESCO on CCI training and education programmes to assist creatives in acquiring the required skills for the creative economy. In some countries, intellectual property rights and corporate laws have been passed and given constitutional value to protect and promote the rights of artists and generate a source of income through their creative work, especially for youth. Funds were released for artists, actors and musicians to ensure the continued contribution of the artistic and cultural sectors after the pandemic.

Member States stressed that the efforts for culture should frame a long-term strategy that goes beyond emergency situations. However, mitigating the impact of COVID-19 is a challenge that looms large in the minds of all citizens. Collective global action is key to unleash the potential of culture as one of the most important drivers of sustainable development. Through mutual efforts, a COVID-19 free world is possible, where cities are bustling with culture, creative industries are thriving, and no livelihood is being compromised.

CALL TO ACTION

Mr. Ernesto Ottone Ramírez, Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO, delivered a closing Call to Action underscoring the importance of improving the status of the artist and cultural professionals. Legislative efforts can drastically improve the social protection, income security and dignity of cultural practitioners. Coherent policies and measures can uphold bundle of rights which together make up Artistic Freedom, including mobility of artists and freedom of expression. He further highlighted the whole-of society approach and cross-sectoral cooperation between culture, communication, information technology actors and beyond which is required to bridge the digital and cultural divides. Mr. Ottone Ramirez called for deepened partnerships with diverse cultural and non-cultural actors to create an inclusive environment conducive to creativity, equity, and prosperity. He outlined the UNESCO-World Bank position paper on “Cities, Culture, Creativity as a critical resource which attests to the catalytic power of knowledge sharing to inspire sustainable, evidence-based urban development around the world.

In conclusion, despite the global challenges – climate change, natural disasters, widening inequality and protracted conflicts – culture serves as a powerful tool to unite, question, push and transform. He closed by underscoring that the transformative potential of culture can only be achieved through bold commitment and concerted action.