

# Culture as a Global Public Good

*United Nations Senior Management Group, New York/ Online 3<sup>rd</sup> August*

Professor Justin O'Connor, University of South Australia

Cultural policy is in a very bad place. It has found itself increasingly marginalised, not only from mainstream development discourse but from “alternative” discourses too. The absence of a cultural SDG is just one manifestation. I’ve been involved in the campaign for a cultural SDG. That would be a start, but it won’t solve the problem, and might not even get adopted unless culture’s position in, and contribution to, public policy – global public policy - is made clear.

We need to establish culture as a right. Certainly, it can help promote human rights in general, but it too is a right, enshrined in the 1949 UN declaration and many subsequent such documents. It was routinely seen as an essential element of social citizenship: ranging (and I quote TH Marshall in 1950) *‘from [granting] the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.’*

Culture as a right means to establish culture as an object of public policy alongside health, education, social services and so on. This was once enthusiastically embraced and anticipated, now it is defensive and apologetic.

This goal faces two challenges. The first, is that culture is defined too broadly, as in the UN declaration on cultural diversity: “culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”

Yes, fine, but only with immense difficulty can this provide the basis for culture as public policy. It is everything. When speaking of SDGs we hear that culture should be transversal, that it should inform all aspects of policy. Again, yes – but in this way it disappears. Food is cultural, and yet do cultural policy makers get invited to agribusiness conferences or nitrogen reduction negotiations?

To be effective, in the first instance culture has to clearly delineate its core focus – basically the system of symbolic/ expressive meaning making that we can call art and culture. This is clear in the 2009 UNESCO framework of statistics. This is what culture contributes to citizenship!

The second challenge is that for twenty years art and culture have been increasingly framed as creative industry or creative economy. The 2005 convention, which began as a way of claiming a space for culture in sustainable development, has become about culture as an economic driver/ enabler. The latest Reshaping Cultural Policies report, with the strap line ‘A global public Good’, has a summary entirely concerned with economic indicators.

The system of art and culture includes massive corporations organised as industries, and it does employ people and generate wealth – it is an economy – but, I would suggest, it should not be framed in public policy as an industry. It is part of the social foundations, the

essentials of a decent life in common, of social citizenship - as with education, health, social services – and the other SDGs.

There is now rising and broad ranging discontent with the reduction of art and culture to an industry as its primary public policy justification. It has begun to hollow out culture as part of global social citizenship.

Returning culture – small c culture – to its proper role as part of basic social rights and guaranteed provision, alongside education and health, is essential to re-establishing it as a robust sphere of public policy.

In terms of ‘global public goods’ or ‘global common goods, as UNESCO’s 2015 Education report, had it, I would say culture is a quintessential public good – it is something we all share (or should share) and is a positive and deliberate contribution of states and civil society to our shared life. It is a common good in that its production is collective and participatory, involving multiple layers of society, in ways that complements and extends public provision and regulation. But what we are realising, as with other forms of ‘commons’, is that culture is not an inexhaustible resource, it is not the infinite reservoir of creativity as eulogised by creative economy. Culture needs to be nurtured and cared for, not as an industry, though industries are involved, but as a public good and a human, citizens right.

In face of our common challenges, such as the pandemic and climate changes, we’ve seen a ‘planetary consciousness’ emerge. Right now, culture as a global public good, as a global common good, is more directly relevant to our future on this planet than at any time I can think of in history. But for that legacy, that potential to be fostered, culture needs again to find its way back into public policy as its own distinct value, its own distinct good, its own distinct right.

Then it can go and meet agribusinesses, then it can start talking about sustainable development, and other transversal themes. But without this distinct basis, it will disappear, right when we need it most.