Culture In Security

International Cultural Relations as an Enabler of Peace through Engagement

"Conflicts are inevitable, but what is not inevitable is the use of force. And to learn that, is a task that is very much related to culture."

Hans J. Giessman, Director Emeritus at the Berghof Foundation, Germany

"Investments in the field of culture and in the conditions that allow people to fully participate in cultural life are absolutely necessary to create cultural democracies and to foster civic engagement, including engagement for peace."

Karima Bennoune, Lewis M. Simes Professor of Law, University of Michigan Law School, USA

Introduction

How can the arts, heritage and the education and cultural sectors most effectively contribute to peace in an uncertain and conflicted world? What contribution is made to peace and security by the various forms of cultural engagement that occur between countries, communities, cultures and peoples, outside the realms of official diplomacy and state-to-state channels?

In addressing these questions, the 2022 International Cultural Relations Research Alliance conference – an official side event to the 2022 **UNESCO Mondiacult World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development** – brought together knowledge from both academic research and hands-on 'grassroots' experience in multiple contexts and regions. The conference provided a platform for insights from projects working in critical peacebuilding contexts in places such as Sudan, Syria, Nepal, Colombia and India to be captured and shared with a global audience, enabling a better understanding of 'what works' (and what does not work) in practice when it comes to delivery of SDG16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

The organization of the conference supports the ongoing mission of the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance (ICRRA) to convene and connect a global network of researchers and practitioners of international cultural relations and thus promote new knowledge and evidence-based advice for policy and practice.

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This report shares the overarching message of the conference – about the potential for international cultural relations to re-energise delivery of SDG 16 and promote a more holistic understanding of peace and security – along with a summary of reflections from the conference around the key concepts of human security and cultural rights. Case studies and quotes by the participants are included throughout to illustrate these points and to exemplify how this cultural relations approach to peace and security works on the ground in different settings.

An international cultural relations approach to peace and security

The conference articulated a distinctive approach to peace and security, focused on building partnerships with communities and stakeholders in diverse global contexts. This approach is characterized by the value and impact of ways of working that emphasise mutuality, reciprocity and sensitivity to local needs, whilst stressing that it is not possible to empower people in a vacuum; it is always necessary to work around political structures to find solutions for conflicts.

Case studies and experiences shared at the conference highlighted the impact of programmes, projects, initiatives and encounters that bring people of different backgrounds, countries and communities together, through and around culture and education – in other words, international cultural relations. Contributors demonstrated how these endeavours support peace and security through collaborating with local projects and groups as main partners and giving them control and autonomy over their initiatives. This approach allows local projects to reach broader groups of people and enables different local groups who share similar experiences in different social, geographic, and economic contexts to build relationships.

What Works? Cultural Relations in action: *Historias en Kilómetros (HEK)*

Historias en Kilómetros (HEK) is an audiovisual filmmaking laboratory in Colombia that seeks to use the transformative power of cinema for communities to represent themselves on their own terms. HEK works with participants in communities deeply affected by the armed conflict, holding year-long roundtable sessions that provide the tools to develop their own productions, choosing what topics they wish to address and what questions to ask. Trainers from around the world guide these sessions and learn what it means for the community to articulate their own reality through film.

Since 2019, HEK has captured the attention of the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, which seeks to explore the causes of the armed conflict in the country. Since then, HEK has built an alliance with them, putting its methodology at the service of the Commission and contributing to national reconciliation. Through HEK's work, all participants in this project witnessed the birth of a network of community filmmakers who create documentary and fiction works that tell their communities' reality. Each production company uses film to tell their stories, from indigenous communities to graffiti artists and ex-combatants. In this way, these communities are creating a new form of self-representation. They have become ambassadors of the Truth Commission's legacy.

HEK's goal is to build sustainable film production companies across Colombia. These forms of self-representation are presented foremost to the communities, so they can hear their voices and see themselves the way they wish to be seen. Key to their success was building trust to allow for difficult conversations between trainers and trainees during the roundtable sessions, creating horizontal conversations and long-lasting relations. HEK's next challenge is, alongside several European embassies in Colombia and local production companies around the country, to develop the first community filmmaking festival in the town of Tierra Grata (a community founded by ex-combatants); and finally, to take their methodology in 2023 to other countries with similar realities (such as Mexico, Guatemala and Bangladesh).

To learn more about Historias en Kilómetros, go to: http://historiasenkilometros.com/

Building these relationships is fundamental to realising the potential of culture, education and civil society to address structural societal and ethnic conflicts, to raise international awareness and to build trust and understanding in communities, particularly within conflict-affected settings. Certainly, culture is enmeshed in complex ways in peace and conflict and culture can also be mobilized to counter reconciliation and foment conflict. However, as former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights Karima Bennoune stresses, a binding legal framework exists on how to orient cultural activities. At its best and most impactful, this can shine a light on our common humanity instead of narrow group identities and provide an antidote to fear, anxiety, and anger as some of the root causes of conflict. As conference contributor Hans-Joachim Giessmann argued:

"Emotions are very important. Peace is not just a matter of rational thinking but a matter of intentional want. Violence can be applied without cooperating, peace cannot be achieved without intentional cooperation with others. I am convinced that art can make a difference in this regard."

According to Giessmann, any cultural relations initiative that aims to build peace and security must resonate with the context and the role of the actors affected by or interested in the given social or political conflict. Any support must be tailor-made to that local context in order to achieve impact. This requires the active involvement and guidance of skilful insiders, those who come from the same or comparable backgrounds as those directly affected by the conflict that is being addressed. The message a community wants to tell of itself is what makes the biggest difference for what works in a community.

What Works? Cultural Relations in action: *Theatre – a thread binding heart to heart in Nepal*

Pro Public uses Playback Theatre to provide a space for dialogue and promote community-based integration of ex-combatants, mitigating the mistrust and fear towards them. Through this improvisational theatre method, these ex-combatants are able to share their life stories with the communities and encourages members of the community to engage in open communication after the performance. Storytellers working in the field are thankful for the opportunity to share their experiences and reflected positively on the impact this had in their lives and also in their interactions with the community, that was now open and respectful.

The theatre was also a platform for other marginalized voices to be heard, such as voices of women and Dalit people. Thus, the project became a space for active participation. Other positive outcomes include a decrease in violence, an increase in empathy and respect, as well as a space to address issues of discrimination in the communities. Additionally, it encouraged the formation of local social organisations, an increase in local level representation, and the development of entrepreneurship projects by former combatants. The project organized a total of 286 community-level theatre dialogues, with a participation of 60 audiences each. Now that the tools have proven to be effective, their next goal is to implement them in other areas and build more and stronger partnerships with local governments.

Project overview: http://propublic.org/project/chautari-natak-storytelling-for-promoting-social-cohesion-in-the-communities-of-nepal/ ; Photo gallery: http://propublic.org/multiplication-of-playback-theatre-performance-for-healing-and-reconciliation-in-mahottari-udayapur-and-rupandehi/

To build trust in communities, identity needs to be understood however as complex and porous. The conference showed how arts and culture can support communities to tell complex, inclusive and open stories and embrace multiple interpretations and narratives – to imagine more inclusive and diverse ways of being human. In a complex and volatile world, at the same time uncovering and amplifying hidden histories that speak to truth (truth-telling), is key to building sustainable communities. Case studies shared at the conference underlined how art can be used to question assumptions around identity, challenging static conceptions of ethnic and religious identity. This "identity widening" is central to expanding mutual understanding and eroding toxic opposition ("us vs them" beliefs) amongst communities.

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What Works? Cultural Relations in action: *Enabling University Peace Education in Sudan and Ethiopia*

Enabling University Peace Education (EUPE) works with public universities located in or near conflict zones in Ethiopia and Sudan who aspire to giving their undergraduates, no matter which subject they are studying, the training, skills and knowledge that will help them be effective peacebuilders in their communities and in their chosen future professions, whether as artists, scientists, medical professionals or whichever career they follow when they graduate.

Universities can be important conduits for local and international cultural relations and a vital pillar of peacebuilding. We have learned that the academic study of peace and conflict alone is not enough to support peace; human interaction, a deeper understanding of cultures, engagement in local contexts and wide knowledge-sharing all matter. EUPE builds this purpose into the heart of the universities - through enabling partnerships between the universities and their communities through staff, student and community activities; forming links between specialist academic peace centres in Sudan/Ethiopia and internationally in the UK and EU, and in collaboration through academic networks in peace research in Africa and beyond. These essential layers of connection support and invigorate the mutual sharing of peace skills, cultural exchange, knowledge generation and learning that are necessary to support future generations of effective, young peacebuilders. EUPE is implemented by the British Council and co-funded by the European Union and the British Council.

Human security and cultural rights

The conference argued that this distinctive cultural relations approach offers a means to re-energise delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 (*promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies*) and to promote a more holistic understanding of peace and security. It foregrounded the concept of Human Security – that is, the prioritization of the security of individuals and human dignity, over the security of states.

The approach of Human Security urges nation states to put human rights closer to the centre of foreign policy, drawing on the understanding that conflicts and threats to peace derive not only from interstate military conflicts, but also from insecurity and discord *within* states and *within* communities. It calls for policies to enable social environments whereby conflicts can be resolved with peaceful means. This concept also acknowledges freedom of fear and distress as preconditions of peace –an idea that contributed to the formulation of the SDGs.

What Works? Cultural Relations in action: *A Citizens' Charter from Syria*

When war started in Syria, a group of activists saw a need to build a peacebuilding network, to create spaces for dialogue in which Syrians could discuss their dreams for Syria. It is important to dream about the future and ask what Syrians want for their country, how can it be different and what needs to be done to achieve those dreams. In 2016, they decided to take their voices to the international community. Their approach of multiple voices proved to be confusing in the international platform, so they developed Citizens' Charter, a project that works outside general norms and that does not present one single voice from Syria. Rather, it is an ongoing process that seeks to show a multiplicity of thoughts. In each round they have discussed different topics, starting with values and principles, and following with questions about identity, the role of civil society, and transitional justice.

Through Citizens' Charter, they promoted dialogue sessions across different regions. To prevent the isolation that occurs during war, it was necessary to create dialogue spaces where everyone's opinion would be included. There is no need for consensus, as the Charter contains all different opinions, not opposed to each other, but all on the same side. The Charter remains a live document and the contents of the Charter is used to advocate at an international level. In future, it can be used in the future to build new national policy. The Citizens' Charter shows that Syrians do not have one single voice, and that single-voice narratives are less useful, as they are limited and do not showcase diversity.

Citizen charter short video (Arabic): https://youtu.be/VHNcbLM-Ek0
Mobaderoon (peace building for Syria): https://mobaderoon.org

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What Works? Cultural Relations in action: *The Ukraine Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI)*

HERI is born as a response to the current war. It is a volunteer initiative comprised of different museum organisations. Its goal is to preserve heritage not only during the war but also in renovation efforts beyond war. Their key work is to map damaged objects in different regions of Ukraine and document damaged heritage. In Borodyanka, they documented sites that would soon collapse and built 3D models. This will allow to assess the damage and will aid in future renovation. Additionally, they took artifacts to museums and recorded oral stories. Currently, they are working with local teams and security services to start international criminal procedures against Russia for the intentional destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

Currently, HERI is working with UNESCO to initiate a project of data infrastructure for Ukrainian heritage. Their bigger goal is to change how heritage is managed, to transform the role of heritage and culture. This underlines the importance of culture and the creation of new symbols of resistance, such as the Vasylkiv maiolica rooster in Borodyanka. It highlights the importance of creating followers instead of consumers, to ensure the preservation of the Ukrainian heritage and their culture.

HERI's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/HERI.Ukraine

The conference advocated for cultural rights as central to the development of human security. The ideas shared during the conference confirmed that cultural rights are essential for facilitating and realizing sustainable development. Keynote speaker Karima Bennoune called for an understanding of peace and security that acknowledges and embraces the role of culture in providing spaces for encounters, for learning about different perspectives, and which promotes social cohesion and inclusive relationships.

This is predicated on the fundamental human right to interaction and cross-cultural exchange of one's own choice, regardless of group affiliation and of borders– exactly those social practices that are at the heart of sustainable peaceful group formations.

The concept of Cultural Rights goes beyond a traditional focus on the need for freedom of expression by pointing to the importance of protecting the conditions that facilitate the exercise of human creativity as a social practice. According to Bennoune, cultural rights encompass the rights both of individuals and of groups of human beings to participate or not to participate in a cultural life of their choice, and to conduct their own cultural practices:

"Cultural rights are core to the human experience, they have inherent importance for human dignity, and they are essential for implementing other universal human rights."

Referring specifically to Article 15 paragraph 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Bennoune emphasised that states have international legal commitments in the field of culture, including the obligation to guarantee cultural rights for all without discrimination:

"These cultural rights guaranteed in international law also include the right to access and enjoy cultural heritage which is part of the right to take part in cultural life, as well as the rights to artistic and scientific freedom amongst others. ... And I think it is just so critically important to remember that there are legal rights and legal commitments of states at issue in the discussions that we are having here."

Ensuring that these legal commitments are honoured is essential in the context of sustainable development. And as at the same time there needs to be more protection and support for those who tell alternative stories, such as cultural activists and other dissident voices, Bennoune concluded:

"... the sustainable development goals are key to the implementation of cultural rights and vice versa."

This leads back to the role of international cultural relations in supporting sustainable development, and peace and security in particular. By advocating, defending and advancing the concepts of cultural rights and human security, international cultural relations initiatives can become central to a re-energised delivery of SDG 16:

"I truly believe that international cultural relations initiatives if infused with the energy commitment and sense of obligations of cultural rights, if determined to center, and protect, and promote the work of Cultural Rights Defenders, and if they truly strive to bring together many voices on all sides within a framework of equality and non-discrimination these initiatives can offer excellent opportunities to reimagine our world together in peace in the 21st century."

The conference argued firmly for cultural rights to be anchored through a specific goal in any follow-up to the SDGs to emphasize this role. This would also support, according to Bennoune, the Human Rights Council's vision of cultural rights as an integral part of human rights, as something that is universal, indivisible, interrelated, and interdependent.

Key recommendation

Cultural rights are essential rights for facilitating and realizing sustainable development and should be anchored through a specific goal in any follow-up to the SDGs to emphasize this role.

Conference recordings and proceedings

Videos of keynote presentations and panel discussions:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL68DLWW5ZNT0kJsrRK_v3I0OBY9ok9kQs

Written conference proceedings, programme, and interviews:
https://www.ifa.de/en/research/icrra/#section6

Social media hashtag: #icrra2022

Further readings

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Schagen, Nathalie van. 2020. *Collaboration Between Temporary Relocation Initiatives: Potentials, Challenges and Next Steps*. ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, ifa: Stuttgart. Available online at: https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.08.2020. Accessed on 21.11.2022.

British Council: *The Missing Pillar – Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.* Available online at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/our-stories/the-missing-pillar-sdgs

British Council and Association of Commonwealth Universities: *The role of international higher education partnerships in contributing to the sustainable development goals* Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/knowledge-centre/partnerships-collaboration/international-higher-education-partnerships-and-sdgs

Imprint

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ifa.