

Nov 04, 2016 by [John Worne](#)

The changing climate for cultural relations ^[1]

What's changed about the climate for cultural relations between the peoples of the world? Pretty obvious, the global economic crisis. On the eve of the G20 summit, cultural relations might seem marginal, irrelevant or a luxury we can't afford. All the answers surely lie with international institutions, diplomats and politicians, not international education and cultural links. And as for international consensus on climate change, can we afford to care any more?

Not surprisingly as someone who works in cultural relations, I think investment in education and culture, the creative and knowledge economy and the environment should be at the top of any "new Keynesian" list of economy boosters. We need to re-learn how to find the "good life" in more than celebrity and conspicuous consumption, as well as kick starting the world economy in a different paradigm. But the bigger argument for cultural relations is coming into focus about 25 years from now.

The UK government's chief scientist, Professor John Beddington, predicted last week a "perfect storm" coming in the 2030s as demand for food and energy jump by 50 per cent, demand for fresh water by 30 per cent and the global population tops 8.3 billion. He fears war, unrest and mass migration. On many projections the UK fares comparatively well in terms of food and water, but this is to ignore the enormous pressure that countries in northern latitudes will face to feed and accommodate peoples from countries whose climates are changing rapidly and irrevocably and whose resources of food, water and energy are collapsing.

People, not governments, will decide much of how we all live through these changes. Will we compete or co-operate, fight or befriend, starve or share? Human nature has the potential for both, but the scale of what is forecast will increasingly bring all of us into contact and conflict with people from other countries and cultures.

This is the future context for cultural relations, the next generational challenge. The leaders who will guide humanity through the coming "perfect storm" are not those who are gathering in London for the G20 this week. Today's leaders will quite rightly be focused on doing their job – the job of governments, international institutions and diplomacy – tackling today's economic problems. At the British Council we are ensuring the voices are heard of those who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions. For the G20 we have a group we call Global Changemakers of young, articulate campaigners and entrepreneurs from all around the world who will meet their leaders to give the perspective of their generation. We also have schools throughout the UK and the classrooms they are connected to from Africa, Asia and the Americas presenting the voice of a future generation.

So although cultural relations has a job to do in the current economic crisis, it also has to equip the next generation of leaders with the internationalism, networks, skills and openness to meet their challenges. The British Council has been equipping future world leaders for 75 years, but the scale of the cultural relations challenge by our 100th year – 2034 – is bigger even than the rising unemployment and extremism of the 1930s when we began. At the same

time as being recognised as prime stakeholders in the future, young people must be equipped with an interest in other countries, an understanding of other cultures and the skills of international citizenship and advocacy to help us all through the storm to come.

Our educational, English language and cultural programmes go far beyond traditional elites and reach millions of people of influence and potential in over 100 countries. If other major nations and partners - public, voluntary and private in the USA, China, India and in Europe were prepared to make a similar investment in all our futures, then mass people to people engagement – face to face and online - would help prepare rising generations for their challenge. It is too late to halt the changes in our global climate, but we can build the international human capital to help us adapt and mitigate – cultural relations is vital investment in both.
