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Taking A Cultural Relations Approach to Sustainable Development: British Council Case Study ^[1]

The UNESCO-MONDIACULT 2022 World Conference classified culture as a global public good, further anchoring culture in the global development discourse. The British Council's broad development aims are summarised in its purpose statement, “to support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide.”

Development typically involves, and often requires, the interaction of different communities, organisations and institutions across national, social and cultural boundaries. A deep understanding of and respect for cultural diversity is required for those relationships to flourish and for interactions to be equitable. To achieve this, cultural relations should be embedded in development policies, strategies and programmes and adopted as a starting point for

international development.

Cultural relations are understood as reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society. The core characteristics of cultural relations elements are often seen to include:

- An approach which is collaborative and non-coercive
- Mutuality
- A commitment to equality and diversity
- Tolerance and respect for difference

Culture can be used as a stimulus for development, as in The British Council programmes: the Cultural Protection Fund and Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth.

The British Council's Missing Pillar report from 2020 specifically examined the role of culture in supporting development, arguing that its centrality to addressing development challenges, and in particular its potential contribution to truly sustainable development, had been underappreciated; and that culture should have been more explicitly represented within the SDGs.

While development often involves actors from different countries, it does not always start by building mutual understanding of cultural diversity and thereby rooting its approach in local circumstances, which a cultural relations approach can offer.

“As highlighted in a recent study by UNESCO,” according to the report, “many countries have begun to view culture as an asset in eradicating poverty, addressing social inclusion and inequality, and creating economic growth.”

A common departure point for internal and external stakeholders in discussing the British Council's Cultural Relations work is its longevity and visible commitment to the countries in which it works. It has been physically present in many countries for more than 50 years; and, importantly, it can point to many countries, including Myanmar and Ukraine, where it has maintained its presence and commitment even during revolution, civil unrest or open conflict.

This longevity and commitment gives the British Council a strong level of credibility and trust with key partners in countries and has allowed it to build multi-layered and multi-sectoral relationships that are ongoing and transcend individual activities or short-term priorities.

In a series of reports written in 2018, the Tom Fleming consultancy showed how these long-term relationships facilitated the contribution over time of the British Council's work to developing the creative economies in Vietnam, Indonesia, Colombia and Nigeria. Each report documents how the British Council's impact has been cumulative and how its longevity and sustained commitment have enabled it to build impact through multiple activities and

programmes over time.

Another example is the British Council's Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth programme, which was designed to leverage the ways in which cultural heritage can contribute to inclusive growth and in which support for local culture can sustainably improve the lives of individuals. The people-centred approach of the programme enabled trust-building and bespoke programming that addressed the needs of target populations within each unique country context.

The programme was implemented in three countries: Colombia, Vietnam, and Kenya.

- Colombia's programme, known as 'Sembrando Nuestros Saberes,' or "Sowing our Knowledge," worked with six indigenous groups to recover and strengthen their cultural heritage.
- Vietnam's "Heritage of Future Past" programme sought to protect and revitalise the country's music and film heritage, both of which are underrepresented and at risk of disappearing.
- Kenya's "#CultureGrows" program aimed to increase visibility, ownership, accessibility, inclusivity, and transmission of cultural heritage by promoting contemporary practice, youth participation, and technology. With partner Book Bunk, the project revived an old colonial library and community spaces as centres of culture, learning and engagement.

The evaluation of the program explained how wide local networks accessible to the British Council could be through a cultural relations approach: "Over the first two years of the pilot of Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth, 240 institutions were supported through the programme's capacity-building activities, including 210 Kenyan organizations, 21 Vietnamese organizations and six indigenous groups in Colombia. In Vietnam, an additional 504 institution-level stakeholders were indirectly supported through capacity-building activities of a partner organisation. As such, there were more organisations reporting strengthened capacity than were initially supported. Each of the partner organisations was a highly regarded expert in its field, and in many cases the capacity-building activities were bolstered by their quality and quantity."

The evaluation of the programme also pointed to the value of adopting a multinational approach as part of a cultural relations approach: "Drawing on action learning from different sources and contexts, the British Council has been able to apply knowledge, expertise and credibility quickly and effectively. The role of the global programme spanning different countries adds prestige and credentials to all elements, expanding their reach, influence and outcomes."

As we approach the UN SDG Goals Review Conference in September 2023, reflected in the continuing calls for a cultural relations approach to sustainable development is a recognition that this approach is, as yet, insufficiently embedded in development policies, strategies and programmes. While development often involves actors from different countries, it does not always start by building mutual understanding of cultural diversity and thereby rooting its approach in local circumstances, which a cultural relations approach can offer.
