

High Culture

Jon Hawkes, 20/5/13

My response to attending the UNESCO conference in Hangzhou, China entitled 'Culture: Key to Sustainable Development' 14-17/5/13

From the 14th to the 17th May, UNESCO and the People's Republic of China brought together 500 delegates from 82 countries in a 5 star hotel in Hangzhou to discuss ['culture: key to sustainable development'](#)

Participants ranged from the Aga Khan to me. I put it this way because I was at the very bottom of the power spectrum. I may have been the only person in attendance who was not a senior representative of a bank, nation, city, funding authority, university, IGO, NGO, foundation, etc in some way involved in 'development'.

The main background paper, ['Culture in the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda: Why Culture is Key to Sustainable Development'](#), is a very good summary of the context in which UNESCO felt it necessary to initiate this gathering. Amongst other proposals, this document describes culture as 'a self-standing pillar of sustainable development' and calls for culture to be a specific 'independent sustainable development goal'.

Upon arrival, the first thing we were given was the text of the 'declaration' we were expected to approve at the conclusion of the 'congress' (I put these words in inverted commas because in UN-speak, they have very particular meanings and positions in the hierarchy of international protocols). The draft declaration called for the following initiatives:

- Integrate culture within all development policies and programmes
- Mobilize culture and mutual understanding to foster peace and understanding
- Ensure cultural rights for all to promote inclusive social development
- Leverage culture for poverty reduction and inclusive economic development
- Build on culture to promote environmental sustainability
- Strengthen resilience to disasters and combat climate change through culture
- Value, safeguard and transmit culture to future generations
- Harness culture as a resource for achieving sustainable urban development and management
- Capitalise on culture to foster innovative and sustainable models of cooperation

But, for reasons known only to UNESCO, the draft declaration didn't follow through on the background paper's suggestion for culture to be identified as a 'self-standing pillar'.

The presentations were ordered around [11 themes](#):

- [Peace and reconciliation, conflict and conflict resolution](#)
- [Poverty & wellbeing](#)
- Local governance
- Business
- [Poverty alleviation and economic growth](#)
- [Social cohesion](#) (this was the theme within which I was asked to present on 'Shaping policies: Culture-sensitive and context-based policies in sustainable development'. If anyone wants a copy of what I said contact [me](#))
- [Environmental sustainability](#)
- [Heritage](#)
- [Creativity and the 'creative industries'](#)
- [Urbanisation and sustainable cities](#)
- Public private partnerships

In other words, UNESCO was attempting to cover every possible base it could imagine without rocking the boat, that is, arguing for the recognition of culture as an essential/useful

instrument in the achievement of every imaginable objective without pushing for its nomination as a specific dimension or goal in itself. This, despite its own arguments concerning culture's 'fundamental' importance.

The existence of a conclusion before the congress had begun made it clear (to me at least) that, despite an extraordinarily packed and complex programme, the real purpose of the event was not to exchange understandings and stories, not to explore new synergies, but rather for this gathering to become the support base for UNESCO's attempt to get 'culture' on to the agenda of the UN's 'post-2015 global development framework and sustainable development goals'. I guess they believe that a declaration approved by 500 high level individuals and the organisations they represent would give them the traction they need in to get their proposals taken seriously.

Being new to the way things are done at the international level, I found this behaviour quite disconcerting. A great deal of money must have been spent flying us from all over the world, housing and feeding us for four days at a 5 star level, and touring us around the sites of Hangzhou, which I must say, has a plethora of fabulous cultural sites and experiences. Obviously, I suppose, other agendas were in play (was this a play to get the recalcitrant USA to re-engage with UNESCO? To get the Saudis to deliver on their promise of big bucks? To give China a platform on which to launch their neo-Confucian proclamations? To give the soon to retire Francesco Bandarin a legacy?).

As I understand things now, the primary reason for the strategy behind this gathering was that culture barely rated a mention in the UN's '[Millennium Development Goals](#)' (2000) or at the Rio+20 conference last year (see below) so it has been the cultural division of UNESCO's intent, for at least the last two years, to build a campaign to correct this oversight.

'[Realizing the Future We Want For All](#)' (the 'outcome document' from the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 2012) identifies '**four key dimensions**', that build on the 'three pillars of sustainable development':

- Inclusive social development
- Inclusive economic development
- Environmental sustainability

With the addition of:

- Peace and security

The Future We Want goes on to say that it is based on 'a vision for the future that rests on the **core values** of human rights, equality and sustainability'.

UNESCO has been advocating that 'cultural sensitivity' be added to the 'core value' list. The declaration overtly calls for culture to 'be included as the fourth fundamental principle of the post-2015 development agenda, in equal measure' with the afore-mentioned core values. But it certainly has no intention of pushing culture as a 'dimension'.

As far as I can tell, the changes to the original draft were relatively minor with one exception: The UCLG's culture committee's [Circular 70](#) made four requests for inclusions in the final declaration, one of which was that the UN's 'new Development Goals should include a specific goal on culture and sustainable development with several targets and measurable indicators on creativity, heritage, knowledge and diversity'. Jordi Pascual and his allies were successful in getting this demand into the new concluding paragraph of the Declaration.

Immediately the congress concluded, on the 17th of May, [UNESCO announced the release of the Hangzhou Declaration](#), without however releasing the document itself, choosing instead to fill their proclamation with grand statements from the eminences who appeared on the opening day. Such, it would appear, is the way of international deliberations.

So was all this ritualistic behaviour worth the effort and resources expended? I am told by those that understand these things that the Declaration will be a useful tool. I met, and hope

to continue connection with, many very interesting people, as, it would appear, did most participants. To many of those at the congress this may well have been both an invaluable and possibly unique opportunity for which I'm sure we are all very grateful. The idea of a cultural perspective being applied to ALL policy gained a little more profile. Beyond that I have no idea.

The downside for me was that the language used in much of the debate was both confused and confusing, the myriad of agendas at play were opaque and impenetrable and the focus appeared to be very much on the economic and industrial aspects of culture

I did begin to get a bit of an idea of what UNESCO perceives culture as being:

- Identity: 'the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group' (from the [UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity](#)).
- Industry: UNESCO, along with some other UN agencies has been for some years developing material and programmes built around the concept of the '[creative economy](#)'.
- Expression: last and very definitely least, the ways that people express their particular identity – 'to live and be what they choose' (from the UNDP's [Human Development Report 2004: Cultural liberty in today's diverse world](#)).

Unfortunately slippage is rampant: one second professional arts practice, then cultural tourism, then urban design, then active participation in public decision making, then arts education. They're all over the shop.

Perhaps I'll give the last word to [Fazle Hasan Abed](#), the founder and director of the [BRAC Foundation](#) in Bangla Desh, who at the opening plenary, stated that no development initiative can be sustainable without becoming embedded in local cultures. It's that simple.