

Voices of Culture on ICR

The purpose of this Voices of Culture cycle on International Cultural Relations (ICR) is to generate project ideas and recommendations for the sector and decision-makers worldwide. The output from the series of Brainstorming sessions and Dialogue meeting with the European Commission will be a catalogue of project ideas and recommendations authored by the participants. The catalogue will be disseminated widely in the sector and marketed worldwide end of March 2022. The discussion paper aims to (1) recall the policy framework of EU international cultural relations, (2) identify the role of European and partner countries' civil society and non-state actors in strengthening a bottom-up approach to ICR, (3) unfold the main trends and ingredients of sustainable ICR in challenging times to make culture key to sustainability at global level; and (4) confirm areas of common interest and identify project ideas in light with the COVID-19 crisis impact on ICR and, in general, the current global context cultural stakeholders are operating in.

Introduction:

In recent years Culture in the EU External Relations has gained a lot of attention in Europe and beyond from various stakeholders - be it institutional, private, civil society, networks, non-state actors etc. to name only a few. The addition and inclusion of culture in the foreign action of the EU, notably by the adoption of a communication towards a strategy for international cultural relations in 2016, provides a policy framework for action. Nowadays, in an ever changing and challenging global context, cultural relations call for new narratives, new models of collaborations, as well as for more solidarity, equality, inclusiveness and sustainability. Particularly in such a context, the connection between culture and sustainable development should also play a crucial role as a guiding principle for rethinking cultural relations from the perspective of new forms of collaboration in the international arena.

There is a common understanding today that culture plays an important role in economic and human development, as well as in societal changes and democratic and even ecological transitions. It is recognized by the EU institutions and Member States, as well as in international fora, as an important component of foreign policy. This evidence has been reiterated as well in view of Mondiacult, the big international UNESCO event on cultural policies and sustainable development, to be held in Mexico in September 2022. This global engagement led by the UN, where the EU and the member states have a crucial role to play, puts cultural international relations at the core of the process, for mobilising culture in the implementation of Agenda2030 in all dimensions of the SDGs.

To be effective, International Cultural Relations (ICR) should be based on a set of shared principles outlined in several policy documents. Moreover, they should be multi-level (international/global, EU, national, local) multi-stakeholders (institutions, civil society, non-state actors, cultural professionals, etc.) and multi-sectoral (cultural and creative sectors, the arts but also education, science, etc.).

The Covid-19 crisis exacerbated existing challenges in the field and brought up to the fore the fragility of the sectors and of its stakeholders. It has also opened avenues for new thinking, new opportunities, innovative experiences and practices, and opened up to new players. It is an opportunity to rethink enhanced, yet more equitable, fair and sustainable ICR.

Civil society and non-state actors, including cultural professionals, are key actors in the field of ICR and play an important role in *resetting* ICR, considering the recent developments that are impacting the sector globally. Voices of Culture offers them a stage to explore their operational experiences, areas of interest, projects ideas and concrete actions and recommendations. The outcomes of the brainstorming and the dialogue with the European Commission will be shared with a wider audience.

Overall EU framework:

The EU has shown interest in the role of culture in its external action since its adoption of the [UNESCO 2005 Convention](#) on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, to which the EU and all Member States are Parties, and since the European agenda for culture published in 2007.

More recently in 2016, with the Joint Communication "[Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations](#)", the EU has established a framework for cultural cooperation with partner countries. In addition, [the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#) has identified cultural diplomacy and cultural relations as a new field for EU joined-up external action and [the New European Consensus on Development](#) recognises the role of culture as an important component and enabler.

Consequently, the [New European Agenda for Culture](#) published on 22 May 2018 confirms that strengthening international cultural relations is one of the main priorities of EU cultural policy. The [Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022](#) adopted in December 2018 includes international cultural relations as one of its 6 priorities.

Moreover, the EU's Foreign Affairs [Council conclusions](#) adopted on 8 April 2019 established the EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a relevant framework for action. They recognize the need for a crosscutting approach to culture, while aiming to strengthen the effectiveness and impact of its foreign policy by integrating international cultural relations in the range of its foreign policy instruments.

In line with the Joint Communication "Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations", the [new Creative Europe Programme](#) adopted in 2021, foresees a strengthened international dimension.

The same year, the EU has adopted the [Council Conclusions on EU Approach to Cultural Heritage](#) that withhold an international dimension and recognising the key role of cultural heritage in promoting peace, democracy and sustainable development.

At EU level, the policy framework and the 2016 momentum combined with the release of several geographical and thematic programmes and initiatives¹ as well as the increased role of EU delegations and EUNIC² clusters in partner countries³ paved the way to an increased interest and a growing EU external cultural agenda.

Though the role, involvement and contribution of civil society organisations and non-state actors, cultural professionals, cultural networks, philanthropic foundations, etc., in Europe and beyond, could be further strengthened, some of the initiatives and programmes referred to above are worth to mention:

¹EU Alumni engagement initiative : <https://alumni.europa.eu>; i-portunus : <https://www.i-portunus.eu>; ACP-EU culture Programme : <https://www.acp-ue-culture.eu/en/>; Transcultura: <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/havana/transcultura>; Tfanen Tunisie Créative : www.tfanen.org; Ilucidare: <https://ilucidare.eu>; European Spaces of Culture: <https://europeanspacesofculture.eu>; Culture X Change: <https://www.culturexchange.eu>; Ethical Fashion Initiative : <https://ethicalfashioninitiative.org>; Cultural Diplomacy Platform and the Cultural Relations Platform : <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu>

² European Union Network of National Institutes of Culture-mostly representing EU Members States.

³ EUNIC Clusters [Guidelines](#) of June 2021; [Joint Guidelines on the partnership between EUNIC, the EEAS and the European Commission](#), of 2019; The [partnership](#) between EUNIC and EU Delegations.

- the European Spaces of Culture⁴ , initiated by the European Parliament, is testing innovative collaboration models in cultural relations between European and local partner organisations in countries outside of Europe including, among others, civil society organisations and non-state actors.
- the Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI)⁵ is a public-private partnership of a UN programme and a group of social enterprises, and several industry partners. It's founded back in 2009 and is also supported by the European Commission directorate responsible for formulating the EU's international partnership and development policy. The EFI works at the intersection of international development, the creative industries and the fashion and lifestyle sector, offering sustainability services, products, and development projects. It is present in several countries among them Burkina Faso, Mali, Ivory Coast, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Haiti, Uganda, etc.
- the Cultural Relations Platform⁶, funded by the EU implements also activities that aim to further engage and consult with cultural actors in partner countries e.g. cultural organisations, local networks, cultural foundations and other cultural professionals.

For the purposes of the discussion, it might be helpful to recapitulate the three main objectives of the Joint Communication.

- *Supporting culture as an engine for social and economic development*
- *Promoting intercultural dialogue and the role of culture for inter-community relations*
Inter-cultural dialogue, including inter-religious dialogue,
- *Reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage as an important manifestation of cultural diversity that needs to be protected.*

In order to fully explore the potential bridging the role of culture in international relations, the Communication argues that it is “necessary to go beyond projecting the diversity of European cultures, and aim at generating a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity-building and global solidarity.”

The Communication also calls for a cross-cutting approach to culture. “Culture is not just about the arts or literature. It spans a wide range of policies and activities, from inter-cultural dialogue to tourism, from education and research to the creative industries, from protecting heritage to promoting creative industries and new technologies, and from artisanship to development cooperation.”

Areas of discussion:

Voices of Culture will frame the brainstorming meeting around the following areas of discussion. Each of these topics is introduced and followed by core questions:

1-The role of European and partner countries' civil society and non-state actors in strengthening a bottom-up approach to ICR

The EU strategy to international cultural relations recognizes the role of civil society and non-state actors in the implementation of the strategy, and the Council conclusions state the importance of a bottom-up approach to ICR in order to ensure reciprocal and mutually beneficial cultural relations based on a two-ways dialogue, mutual listening and sharing.

Equal partnerships and joint creation are the bedrock of deep and lasting relations and ties. This has been proven indispensable in dispelling perceptions of neo-colonialist aims and flattening power

⁴ <https://europeanspacesofculture.eu>

⁵ <https://ethicalfashioninitiative.org>

⁶ <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu>

dynamics. Therefore, the structured dialogue with non-state actors, local consultations and the acknowledgement of the role of cultural professionals who are driven by intrinsically cultural imperatives, is crucial in the sphere of international cultural relations for the sake of sustainability, inclusiveness and fairness.

The study carried out by the Cultural Relations Platform⁷ to analyse the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the cultural and creative sectors and on ICR, states that during the crisis, civil society and non-state actors have played an important role in mitigating the risks and in alleviating the negative economic and social impacts of COVID-19. In many countries, civil society has often performed an advocacy role, which has proven crucial in convincing the government to take specific measures regarding the cultural sector.

- a) What is the role of European and partner countries' civil society organisations and non-state actors, including cultural professionals, in shaping the international and European agenda of ICR? How can the bottom-up approach to ICR be reinforced? What recommendations should be addressed to (i) EU institutions and Member States to enhance inclusiveness and sustainability, (ii) their peers and other non-state actors for closer coordination, consultation and concertation?
- b) How can European and partner countries' civil society organisations and non-state actors further participate in implementing international cultural relations/cooperation projects? What are the implicit and explicit principles that should guide equitable international cultural relations?

2-The COVID-19 Crisis and the new scenario of International Cultural Relations (ICR)

Global challenges are limiting the spheres of action of cultural institutions, cultural actors and professionals from the loss of economic revenues linked to the COVID-19 crisis, the shrinking of free and democratic spaces to the mobility constraints and the challenges driven by climate change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a devastating storm of adverse social and economic impacts within the cultural sector in Europe and elsewhere around the globe. The restrictive measures and the emergency outbreak affected and is still affecting the capacity of cultural actors to conduct international cultural relations⁸.

Many organisations suspended their international collaborations and *went local*. Exchange and mobility programs as well as transnational residencies have not only been canceled or postponed *sin die*, but also questioned in light of the global climate crisis and, in some cases, in light of governments' isolationist and protectionist policies.

The move/shift towards the digital spheres and platforms, exacerbated by the crisis, created a substantial disruption in the flow of exchanges, production, dissemination and consumption of culture and arts, thus opening a myriad of possibilities from the digitization of cultural content to new digital engagement forms. At the same time, it questions the safeguarding of cultural diversity and cultural expressions, pointing out to the digital divide and the accessibility issues. Nevertheless, the digital shift allowed projects to be transformed, activities to be carried on, and new forms of collaboration to be launched.

⁷ <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/2021/02/10/study-is-out-impact-of-covid-19-on-ccs-in-partners-countries/>

⁸ Idem 4

Yet, some new initiatives have been launched⁹ and some actors pursue cross-border cooperation, operating in a changed context of international cultural relations laying the ground to new thinking, new forms of engagement, innovative practices and new avenues in ICR.

- a) What new practices and crisis-alleviating initiatives emerged in the sector in Europe and beyond? What initiatives support ICR? How do these initiatives contribute to consolidate the interplay between culture and SDGs through international cultural relations?
- b) Looking ahead, what are the ingredients that ensure the sustainability of ICR in post-covid times and in the long term?
- c) What are the measures EU institutions, Member States and partner countries should take to ensure sustainable ICR? What are the responsibilities and the actions civil society and non-state actors, including cultural professionals can take to alleviate the impact of the crisis and contribute to sustainable ICR?

3-Topics/areas of common interest and pressing needs in ICR

Different actors operating in the realm of ICR, voiced out several pressing topics to be addressed collectively: from the needs and principles underpinning cultural relations (fairness, equity, inclusiveness, mutual understanding, reciprocity, power balance, trust building, etc.) to the common areas of interest and work to be addressed through cultural relations engagement, co-creation and cooperation projects.

For example, RESHAPE EU¹⁰, a project co-funded by Creative Europe programme, provides a multitude of alternative practices and collaborative models, placing them in line with artistic and social innovation and the principles of fairness, solidarity, geographic balance and sustainability.

It is an experimental, collaborative, bottom-up process that creates instruments for transition towards new, fairer arts ecosystem. During the closing conference in Zagreb and Ljubljana in June 2021, RESHAPE presented its 9 tested prototypes developed collaboratively by 40 artists and art workers from across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to help and support the transition towards fair and sustainable practices and presented major RESHAPE themes:

- Arts and Citizenship
- Fair Governance Models
- Value of Art in Social Fabric
- Solidarity Economies
- Transnational/Post-national Artistic Practices

In its research report titled *composing trust*¹¹, culture Solutions also pointed out different areas of action:

- the power of culture in societal change
- Digital change and ICR
- Culture and climate change
- Intercultural practices in ICR
- etc.

⁹ <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/2021/07/08/download-our-handbook-cultural-relations-in-the-new-normal/>

¹⁰ <https://reshape.network>

¹¹ <https://www.culturesolutions.eu/publications/composing-trust-2019-2020-research-report/>

Besides, in the framework of the November 2021 edition of the Global Cultural Relations Programme¹² (GCRP), flagship activity of the Cultural Relations Platform¹³, that gathers cultural practitioners from more than 50 countries around the world to share knowledge, innovative experiences and practices to reset and shape the new normal of ICR, participants pointed out to the following topics and areas of interest:

- Connectivity and digitalization in ICR
- Peace building and reconciliation
- Innovative mobility practices
- Decolonisation of cultural relations
- ICR and Climate change
- Advocacy in the framework of SDGs.

- a) What are the topics/areas of interest in the field of ICR you think are the most urgent to focus on and unfold?
- b) What project ideas would best illustrate the above?

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¹² <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/2021/12/13/its-a-wrap-what-weve-learned-from-gcrp-2021/>

¹³ <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu>