

# International Cultural Policies: Consensuses and Challenges

## *Las políticas culturales internacionales: consensos y desafíos*

Lourdes Arizpe

Professor-researcher at the Regional Center for Multidisciplinary Research-UNAM  
[la2012@correo.crim.unam.mx](mailto:la2012@correo.crim.unam.mx)



### **Abstract:**

Demands have been voiced for the international political agenda to include alternative cultural views that call for the peaceful coexistence of human beings and the environment. This cultural transformation does not constitute an attack on the solid foundations of the international cultural policies derived from the Second General Conference of UNESCO in 1948, but it does force us to rethink their premises, guidelines and actions. This article takes us briefly through international cultural policies and related themes, and discusses the major challenges facing us amid the uncertainty of today's rapidly changing world.



### **Resumen:**

Actualmente hay un clamor por colocar en el escenario de la política internacional las visiones culturales alternativas que conciben la coexistencia y la convivencia con el entorno natural y con otros seres humanos. Esta transformación cultural no destruye las bases firmes sobre las que se construyeron las políticas culturales internacionales surgidas de la Segunda Conferencia Internacional de la Unesco de 1948, pero sí obligan a repensar sus premisas, su normatividad y sus acciones. En este artículo se presenta un breve recorrido de las políticas culturales internacionales y de las temáticas desarrolladas en este campo, y se señalan los desafíos más importantes actuales en un mundo de cambios rapidísimos e inciertos.



### **Key Words:**

Cultural policy, culture, globalization, MONDIACULT, cultural diplomacy, cultural heritage, climate change, technology.



### **Palabras clave:**

Política cultural, cultura, globalización, Mondiacult, diplomacia cultural, patrimonio cultural, cambio climático, tecnología.

# International Cultural Policies: Consensuses and Challenges

*Lourdes Arizpe*

## Introduction

International cultural policy came into being at the Second General Conference of UNESCO, held in Mexico in 1948 to prevent the “wars that begin in the minds of men.” At the time, the world saw itself as a single entity, well aware that the road to accords and development would be a long one lined with transactions and negotiations.

There can be no denying the success of this political and cultural undertaking, which has warded off major wars since the 1950s. Then came the “Great Acceleration,” the name given to the process that marked the beginning of the Anthropocene, a new epoch in which the imprint of human activity is comparable to that of the geological forces that shaped the great eras in history. The crucial failing of that magnanimous mid-twentieth-century view of a united international world was that it was conceived of as a fiction that overlooked its interconnection with that which sustains life on Earth.

Demands are now being voiced for the inclusion of alternative cultural views that call for the peaceful coexistence of humans and the environment on the international political agenda. This cultural transformation does not constitute an attack on the solid foundations of existing international cultural policies, but it does force us to rethink their premises, guidelines and actions. In order to define cultural policies in today’s diversified, openly activist context, we must first understand the milestones of this evolution, like the World Conference on Cultural Policies (MONDIACULT),

held in Mexico in 1982; the *Our Creative Diversity* report presented by the World Commission on Culture and Development in 1995; and countless other UNESCO and U.N. conventions and programs on culture.

This article takes us briefly through international cultural policies and related themes before turning to the major challenges facing us in the uncertainty of today's rapidly changing world. Joseph Stiglitz pointed out that the Global Economic Forum, formerly a champion of globalization, was concerned mainly with its failures at its May 2022 meeting in Davos. Criticism was met with suggestions to put neoliberal policies on hold in favor of "regional diversification," "reshoring" or even "deglobalization". As Stiglitz so rightly commented, unable to reconcile their differences, political and business leaders resorted to platitudes.

There is the possibility culture could once again take centerstage, just as it did in the reaching of agreements in the twentieth century—provided it is able to shake off the bonds of cultural conservatism and become a force for change. The space culture moves in is more universal than politics and more libertarian than the market; it is the receptor of the new initiatives of individuals and groups that "magically" communicate with one another from every corner of the globe using digital technologies. What we need to do is analyze what is happening and build fresh consensuses under the the guidance of new or refunctionalized international institutions.

## Culture in international discourse

After World War II, the term "culture" made its way into international discourse in the new institutional context of the United Nations, adding yet another layer to the many different interpretations of culture that already existed. According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone [...] is entitled to realization [...] of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality" (art. 22). The document also states that everyone is entitled to participate freely in the cultural life of their community and to protection as the author of literary or artistic works (art. 27).

In terms of programs, the concept of culture appeared in the resolutions of the UNESCO General Conference held in Mexico City in 1947. In his opening

speech, the president of the Conference, Education Secretary Manuel Gual Vidal, said that UNESCO should ensure that the many and heterogeneous particularisms that lead to wars be united and coordinated in the interests of peace, while preserving the independence, integrity and rich diversity of all cultures.<sup>1</sup>

A program was adopted at that conference whose second chapter (on the “free flow of ideas”) included an important section on “exchanges between cultures.”<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterwards, the principal lines of action of the “The Programme of UNESCO in 1948” were announced: conservation of cultural heritage—implicitly defined as archaeological sites and monuments—and the promotion of the “traditional” arts. It also provided for support for artists and the promotion of the arts, the development of copyrights and the translation of the classics of world literature.

In 1972, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Natural and Cultural Heritage took a new regulatory approach to archaeological and historic heritage—one to which Mexico made a significant contribution—and told a different narrative of the history of culture and the notion of humanity. The 1972 Convention is the second-most-ratified<sup>3</sup> to date and became the center of a constellation of agreements and guidelines that took into account new perceptions of natural heritage and heritage created by cultures. The governments of developing countries showed more interest in the strengthening of culture and national identities.<sup>4</sup>

It was not until the 1980s that cultural policy was overtly used as an instrument for linking culture with development. The results of these meetings were discussed at the World Conference on Cultural Policies, which took place in Mexico City in 1982. MONDIACULT, as the conference came to be

<sup>1</sup> Manuel Gual Vidal, *Unesco; discurso pronunciado por el ciudadano Secretario de Educación Pública y Presidente de la delegación del Gobierno Mexicano, ante la Segunda Conferencia de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura, al instalarse en la capital de la República Mexicana*, Mexico, SEP/UNESCO, 1947, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, “The Programme of UNESCO in 1948”, in *Resolutions Adopted by the General Conference during Its Second Session. Mexico, November-December 1947*, Paris, UNESCO, 1948, pp. 12-18.

<sup>3</sup> The most-ratified is the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>4</sup> See Lourdes Arizpe, “The Intellectual History of Culture and Development Institutions”, in Vijayendra Rao and Michel Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford, Stanford University, 2004, pp. 163-185.

known, established an international working concept based on a broader anthropological definition of *culture* as “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> The Mexico City Declaration underscored the cultural aspect of development by stating that balanced development can only be achieved when strategies take into consideration cultural factors and are designed in light of the historical, social and cultural context of each society. It was at MONDIACULT that the term “intangible” was first used to refer to cultural heritage in international discourse. The term came up in connection with the new *Culturas Populares*<sup>6</sup> program created in Mexico in the late 1970s with the support of Education Minister Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and that was headed by Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Guillermo Bonfil.

A decade later, the United Nations World Commission on Culture and Development (in which I took part) incorporated “expressive culture”—a term for the cultures of emerging and developing countries—into cultural policies in the *Our Creative Diversity* report submitted to the UNESCO General Conference of 1995.<sup>7</sup> The idea to emerge from this report, its core argument, is that development encompasses not just access to goods and services, but the opportunity to choose a full, rewarding way of life that is both valuable and valued. The Commission stressed that only those cultures that showed consideration for other cultures would be deemed deserving of respect, essentially drawing a line against intolerance and cultural fundamentalism.

<sup>5</sup> World Conference on Cultural Policies, *Final Report*, Paris, UNESCO, November 1982, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, a group of anthropologists, myself included, pressured the Mexican government to create a new, multicultural policy. The new program, *Culturas Populares*, was headed by Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Guillermo Bonfil, who, in his capacity as director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, had actively participated in meetings on the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

<sup>7</sup> The Commission was presided over by former U.N. Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and its members included Mahbub Ul Haq, Celso Furtado, Yoro Fall, Elizabeth Jelin, Keith Griffin and Lourdes Arizpe. It conducted nine regional consultations around the world and published the *Our Creative Diversity* report in 1996. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (dir.), *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Paris, UNESCO, 1996.

In short, thought on culture had evolved to the point where it was agreed that culture is not an object, a representation or a place, although these may incorporate it and give it material form. Rather, culture is formed and transformed through meanings created in the depths of collective memory and the experiences of individuals striving to defend or improve their lives. The main premise of this definition is that cultures are constantly changing to the extent that those who practice them and the groups interested in them create new forms and adapt to the circumstances of their times. Thus, the world we create through culture is molded by an incessant flow of cultural creativity at the hands of every human being in every country and on every continent.

## Cultural diplomacy

Culture remains central to international relations, as confirmed by several recent cultural diplomacy initiatives taken by Mexico.

### *The Cultural Diplomacy Council of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture*

In 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture launched a joint “cultural diplomacy” program for the country’s symbolic reconfiguration. This program provided for the design of new cooperation models, the strengthening of partnerships, and the inclusion of the Mexican Foreign Service (SEM) in these efforts. The Council for Cultural Diplomacy was formed by highly experienced academics, artists and intellectuals of high repute who work closely and in a coordinated fashion to promote Mexico abroad and, concomitant to the promotion of Mexican roots, history and pride of belonging, initiatives with greater impact were introduced in which culture is viewed as an instrument for mending the fabric of society. By the same token, this new cultural diplomacy both supports and mobilizes the principles of foreign policy to address racism, xenophobia and similar discourses.

In 2020, the pandemic necessitated the redesign of the promotion and cooperation models used by cultural cooperation actors. Different regions came together to develop intercultural programs like Natur-Kultur (culture and nature) and the virtual “Gender Equality in the Building of the Future”

summit was held in March 2021 in Brussels, Belgium. A multidimensional, interdisciplinary event, testimonies on emerging manifestations of feminism were heard here and debate centered on how these can be used in a positive way to rally the world around gender equality.

### *United Cities and Local Governments*

The Izmir Declaration on United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) states that culture shapes the future of humanity.<sup>8</sup> A meeting was held in Mexico City on April 20, 2020, to launch the summit held in Izmir, Türkiye, in September 2021 and the UCLG presented its Pact for the Future of Humanity, intended to shore up messages on the role culture plays in sustainable development in the context of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals (SDGs). More broadly speaking, the pact proposes supporting a narrative in which unique traits are clearly recognized as the nucleus of local and regional identity, putting us on the path to global solidarity, peace and respect for human rights. It advocates bolder action by cultural sectors, institutions and organizations in support of human rights, gender equality and the battle against inequalities, and to check and mitigate climate change. There is also mention of plans to provide effective protection for those working in the different fields of culture.

A recent academic project is the North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative (NACDI), which believes that the fundamental challenge of our day is to mitigate the global cultural conflict and that the forging and management of new global relations should no longer be left to a group of powerful countries from the Cold War era, but should engage new “diplomats” like non-state and civil organizations, transnational institutions and activists.

According to NACDI, the practice of cultural diplomacy should be based on horizontal communication and multidirectional flows of information

---

<sup>8</sup> In the summit program, UCLG also states that “The pandemic of COVID-19 has shown the profound need for culture: people have turned to culture to reinforce the sense of belonging in communities and cities, inventing new forms of participation, recognizing what brings us together and creating new meaning and solidarity”; see “Launch Of The Summit: UCLG Culture Summit 2021 IN Izmir Culture: Shaping the Future 10 June 2021” at [https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/launch\\_concept\\_note\\_en\\_1.pdf](https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/launch_concept_note_en_1.pdf) (date of access: August 5, 2021).

and dialogue, while diplomacy should focus on practices and protocols that provide guidance, *i.e.*, as a collection of conducts, dispositions and attitudes within the broader framework of cultural relations.

## Challenges that require international cultural policy actions

The following is an outline of the most pressing challenges that will have to be addressed by international policies.

### *Health, a major new component of international cultural policies*

Scientific evidence indicates that we will see new strains of COVID-19 and outbreaks of varying severity into the future. This means health-related cultural policies will take precedence in international relations, with emphasis on medical discoveries, the production and distribution of vaccines, wellbeing and healthcare—the burden of which can no longer be put on women, but requires the cooperation of men, an issue that I discuss later on. Likewise, the health and wellbeing emergency has raised awareness of the fact that our bodies are inseparable from the biological processes and ecosystems we form part of.

This idea is one of the pillars of a new vision of the future, one that is intertwined with the shoots, roots and branches that sustain life on Earth.

As for the more immediate goals of international cooperation to combat COVID-19, the recent study, The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), and other social science sources have identified “interpersonal trust”<sup>9</sup> as the most important factor in handling the pandemic. Mortality rates were lower in countries whose citizens trusted physicians, got vaccinated, respected health measures and cooperated to help and care for others.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hale, “We’ve Found One Factor that Predicts which Countries Best Survive COVID,” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/24/countries-covid-trust-damage-pandemic> (date of access: August 12, 2022).



In Latin America and the Caribbean, the evidence corroborates that differing levels of political capacity for cooperation between governments, the scientific community and citizens can be linked to results. Some countries successfully managed the pandemic, like Costa Rica, Uruguay and, at the outset, Chile, while others reported high levels of infection, including Brazil, which had the highest rate; Mexico, with variable results; and Peru, where the consequences were devastating.<sup>10</sup>

The ethnographic study we conducted on the COVID-19 pandemic in Tepoztlán, Morelos, in November 2020 supported this finding. We found that, amid the chaos caused by fake news and social media absurdities, it was neighborhoods working together, primarily women with the cooperation of extended families, that can be credited with the success of the initial health measures and those later negotiated with business and hotels owners, which helped buffer the impact of the virus.<sup>11</sup>

### *Climate change as the product of cultures*

As the Mexican anthropologist Eckart Boege so aptly says, “culturally created biodiversity is the result of a long process of exchange and systematic cultural selection.”<sup>12</sup> We all know “Mexico is one of the 12 megadiverse countries in the world, home to between 60 and 70 percent of the planet’s biodiversity [...] reason why it has special status as regards the conservation of species and ecosystems.”<sup>13</sup> It is now widely acknowledged that sustainability requires cultural changes, like forcing religions to acknowledge that, rather than custodians, human beings are responsible

<sup>10</sup> Rubén Ruiz Guerra (coord.), *Pandemia de covid-19. Lecturas de América Latina*, Mexico, UNAM, 2021, 10.

<sup>11</sup> L. Arizpe, Esaú Bello, Sara González, Leopoldo Núñez and Isis Saavedra L., “Encuesta de percepciones sobre la pandemia covid-19 en Tepoztlán, Morelos (México)”, in *Korpus 21*, vol. 1, no. 2, may-august 2021, pp. 271-290, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.22136/korpus21202134> (fecha de consulta: 12 de agosto de 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Eckart Boege, *El patrimonio biocultural de los pueblos indígenas de México. Hacia la conservación in situ de la biodiversidad y agrodiversidad en los territorios indígenas*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2008, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

for the world we live in and for redefining “human nature,” a task that the social sciences and philosophy have now taken in hand.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of international cultural policy, the following issues are of immediate concern and deserve to be prioritized.

### *The protection of cultural heritage from climate change*

Cultural heritage sites have come under increasing threat from climate change in the last decades. UNESCO has been joined by academic and international organizations in its call to address the impact of recent geo-atmospheric changes. There is evidence to suggest the effects of climate change on tangible, intangible and natural cultural heritage can be combatted in the region.

That said, the phenomenon of climate change is taking place across such a wide range of geophysical and cultural contexts that no international organization or scientific discipline has the capacity to address it alone.<sup>15</sup>

In Latin America and the Caribbean, many countries, the Caribbean included, are already States Party to the forward-looking Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (the Escazú Agreement), which establishes an international benchmark in this area. For example, constitutional reforms in Ecuador and Bolivia have centered on protecting Pachamama or Mother Earth.

As for actions, I unreservedly agree with Sánchez Cordero, who advocates public policies that view copyright legislation as a social product with a social function, and that safeguard the interests of cultural communities, especially indigenous ones.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> L. Arizpe, *Culture, International Transactions and the Anthropocene*, New York, Springer, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> George Hambrecht and Marcy Rockman, “International Approaches to Climate Change and Cultural Heritage”, in *American Antiquity*, vol. 82, no. 4, October 2017, pp. 627-641; T. Hale, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Sánchez Cordero, “Violencia política y salvaguarda cultural”, in *Proceso*, no. 2303, December 20, 2020, pp. 60-62.

### *The trafficking of cultural property, vandalism and the intervention of criminal organizations*

We have witnessed the deliberate destruction of historic and cultural monuments in Mostar and Sarajevo, Bamiyan and Timbuktu, to cite just a few examples, while prevailing conditions of inequality and the trading of art and archaeological artifacts as investments has resulted in increased trafficking, inciting the looting of museums and archaeological sites.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of cultural policy, there have been some important initiatives in this area, like the UNIDROIT Convention, in which Sánchez Cordero plays a predominant role. I agree with Sánchez' proposal, firstly to prioritize measures to combat illicit trade in cultural objects by means of domestic legislation that requires due diligence and proof of provenance for works of art and especially archaeological artifacts, and secondly, to develop cultural rights, as mentioned by the U.N. Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, who, in her 2021 report on the damaging effects of COVID-19, highlighted the need for public policies that protect the freedom of scientific and artistic creativity, and eliminate all forms of censorship.<sup>18</sup>

### *The presence of women in international cultural policies*

Since the end of the last century, women have become increasingly active in all aspects of life. The demographic transition, scientific discoveries on human reproduction, the hiring of women to lower corporate costs on the global market and the revalidation of feminist thought are all interconnected processes that will continue to have tangible outcomes in decades to come. These are irreversible, historic processes in which the role of women has taken on even greater significance now that health and sustainability are priority items on the international agenda.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> U.N. General Assembly, "COVID-19, culture and cultural rights Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennouna", A/HRC/46/34, February 17, 2021.

These changes have been partially reflected in conferences and international meetings like the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. More and more women are now participating in institutions and international programs related to culture, culture ministries and all kinds of social movements with cultural ends.

It is vital cultural policy continue to support actions and programs that encourage the active and decisive participation of women, especially those focused on sustainability.

### *The insertion of cultures in a virtual world*

The vast array of technologies at our disposal today (television, audiovisual productions, computers, tablets and mobile phones) offers endless broadcasting and communications possibilities, but we need to be aware that these conceal a web of algorithms that leverage data to offer us personalized recommendations, while plying us with misinformation and disinformation spread by bots and trolls. That said, audiovisual languages are flourishing and fresh creative capacities are coming on line as we migrate from real life to a virtual one. All that can be said is that the relevance of the virtual world in the real one will depend on the experiments conducted by practitioners of different cultures across the globe.

In 2005, the UNESCO Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions set the international course in this field. I could not agree more with Sánchez Cordero, who says public policies should treat digital technologies as a service and not as a product, and claims we need to revert the conceptualization of so-called “technological neutrality” spread by universal digital platforms.<sup>19</sup>

### *Transformative international cultural policies*

International cultural policies should be designed not just to protect and preserve culture, but should be primarily transformative. Our obses-

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Sánchez Cordero, “T-MEC. Los infortunios culturales mexicanos (segunda y última parte)”, in *Proceso*, no. 2257, February 2, 2020, pp. 55-54.

sion with the market will spell disaster for the planet if we are not able to look further than profits and start viewing trade, as practiced by cultures, as the *pièce de résistance* of our history. Human beings are creators; we have created ecosystems, countless species of plants and animals, incredible transportation and communications systems, and other inventions that defy the imagination. Nations and societies must once again embrace this calling, which goes far beyond the world of neoliberalism, extractivism and domination. We need to prioritize cultural policies and programs that protect human capacities, so we can find solutions to the most serious threats to our planet. And we need to encourage the convergence of all these creative actions on the international arena by means of constant intellectual, political and social exchanges, for it is freedom to create that will make it possible for humankind to survive on this unique planet.