

# Sustainable Development and Cultural Policy: Do They Make A Happy Marriage?

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to foster debate within the academic community on the notion of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. Is Agenda 21 for Culture not just another way of making the case for increased funding of the arts by the different governments? Are the goals of this fourth pillar not the same as those traditionally found in cultural policies? This article looks at the origins of Agenda 21 and raises questions about its relationship with the challenges facing cultural and arts organizations, the different definitions of the term "culture," and the distinction between high and popular culture. It explores the links between these questions and the economic and market issues confronting stakeholders in the cultural sector as well as public policy makers.

## Keywords:

Cultural Policy  
Agenda 21  
Sustainable  
development  
Market Issues  
High art / popular  
art

## Introduction

Cultural actors in all developed countries are struggling with a serious lack of funding. The economic crisis of 2008 has had a devastating impact on government budgets, leading to severely limited access to public funding. The general consensus is that this situation is hampering the growth of the cultural sector, that young creators are being sacrificed and that cultural organizations cannot afford to expand.

Against this backdrop, some academics have proposed suggestions for dealing with this crisis, while others have sought explanations other than the financial destitution of governments. Bonet and Donato (2011) launched a discussion on the financial crisis currently facing the planet and on its impact on models of governance in the cultural sector. These authors advocate for an examination of the models of financing and management by both cultural actors and governments. For his part, Colbert (2012, 2009) questions whether it is possible that the market for culture has simply reached its saturation point, which would explain the cultural sector's difficulties as well as governments' inability to solve the permanent state of crisis in which the arts community is mired. Another school of thought seeks alternative solutions to the so-called under-funding of culture. It is in this context that the notion of "culture" as the fourth pillar of sustainable development emerged.

This article begins with an overview of the current state of cultural policies. It then goes on to review the definition of sustainable development and its integration of the notion of culture. Finally, we develop several reflections and questions on this process.

## 1. Policies of cultural democratization: A failing grade

Both Throsby (1995) and Léa and Brodhag (2004) trace the history of the concept of sustainable development from its origins with the Club of Rome in the early 1970s through the 1980s and 1990s. From 1970 to the present, approaches to sustainable development have focused successively on the ecological, economic and then human or social dimensions of sustainable development. It wasn't until the publication by the World Commission on Culture and Development of its 1995 report entitled "Our Creative Diversity" that the cultural dimension was integrated in the discussion. In the wake of this report, authors such as Porcedda and Petit (2001) sought to link the cultural and the social by arguing that culture can make an important contribution to social order and human development. Over the course of these successive reflections, little or no consideration was given to the definition of the concept of culture and to the shift that occurred from "protecting the culture of developing countries in the context of the economic development of wealthy countries" to support for high culture through cultural policies.

The issue of cultural democratization is a recurring theme that was once again pushed to the fore on the occasion of the anniversaries of the cultural ministries of France and Quebec, notably, in 2009 and 2011. Indeed, one of the founding missions of the French Ministry of Culture upon its creation in 1959 was "to make the great masterworks of humanity, and above all of France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French people" (decree no. 59-889 of July 24, 1959, cited in Saint Pulgent, 2009: 15 [translation]). This goal of democratizing culture was subsequently adopted by the majority of industrialized countries. Underlying this commitment to democratization is the idea that a culture of high "quality," or the so-called "high arts," should be shared by all. This "legitimate" culture stands in contrast to cultural products intended for mass consumption (popular art). This long-term strategy aimed at reconciling cultural supply and demand drew criticism, notably from Urfalino, who argued that "... in the short term, this strategy leads to the illegitimacy of public preferences as the main criterion of evaluation" (Urfalino, 1989, p. 97 [translation]). However, this "reconciliation" did not happen because, as Donnat (2002) shows, after 50 years of cultural policies based on cultural democracy, the sociological profiles of audiences of "high culture" have changed very little, whereas the cultural industries have seen extensive development. "Cultivated culture" continues to attract mainly more educated people, while continuing to be largely ignored by people in less educated social classes. Moreover, popular art appeals to all levels of society, regardless of the level of education. In fact, one can say that art, whether high or popular, is accessible to the whole population (Colbert, 2007).

In France, notably, cultural policies based on the objective of cultural democratization were developed in a context of local development. The strategy was to create demand by increasing supply. The arrival of Jack Lang in the Ministry of Culture ushered in a diversification of cultural policies, notably with the question of the promotion of cultural democracy and amateur artistic practice, or support for new forms of artistic and cultural expression. However, the emphasis was placed on promoting the artists, and "citizens continued to be perceived mainly as an "audience" to be won over and retained" (Auclair, 2011, p. 9 [translation]).

When the strategy of democratization of high culture failed to produce the expected results, stakeholders in the cultural sector sought to find other vocations for art. This led to the emergence of various purposes for art that were eventually incorporated in artists' discourse in order to justify calls for greater assistance from governments. These purposes included:

- Culture as a contributor to economic growth, thanks to the economic spinoffs generated by jobs in the cultural sector, cultural tourism, etc.;

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- Culture as a builder of social ties (in underprivileged communities, by fostering citizen participation, etc.);
- Culture as a means of combatting social and cultural exclusion by contributing to the social and professional insertion of citizens;
- The use of works of art in the urban transformation of certain neighbourhoods;
- Culture as a means of contributing to the attractiveness and prestige of a city (Auclair, 2003).

The point here is not to deny art's ability to contribute to the well-being of the population in the area of health, education or social action. Rather, we must acknowledge that these are peripheral aims to which other sectors can also lay claim, whether it be participation in sports, developing a network of friends, volunteering or fostering family ties.

## 2. Sustainable development: From the emergence of a social dimension to the progressive integration of culture

The first definition of sustainable development appeared in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, founded by the UN in 1983, which states that: “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” It goes on to say that: “in its broadest sense, the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature” (WCED, 1988).

This definition is based on two main principles:

- Harmony between human beings and nature (respect for the planet's “ecological limits”);
- Harmony among human beings (i.e., social cohesion).

The social dimension is clearly evident in this definition from the outset, although the same cannot

be said of the cultural dimension: “the pursuit of sustainable development requires a social system that provides for solutions for the tensions arising from disharmonious development [and] implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation” (WCED, 1988).

However, although the social dimension is mentioned, it is not well developed and, as shown by Sébastien and Brodhag (2004), the question of harmony among human beings quickly becomes assimilated in a confusing mixture of environmental protection and economic development. Thus, until 1992 and the Rio Conference, sustainable development was organized around two main pillars: the environment and development. Following the Rio Declaration, the “development” pole was split in two, with the economy on one side and the social dimension on the other. With the ratification of Agenda 21 (the “21” stands for the 21<sup>st</sup> century), over 170 countries made a formal commitment to a plan of action that outlined how sustainable development should be implemented by regional and local authorities.

However, it wasn't until the end of the 1990s that this approach based on the three “pillars” of economic development, social development, and environmental protection was consecrated at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which recalled the importance of promoting “the integration of the three components of sustainable development [...] as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” (World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, paragraph 2). In support of Agenda 21 (Chapter 28), local authorities were called upon to adopt “a local Agenda 21” in their respective communities. However, this gave rise to a wide diversity of interpretations.

For example, Sébastien and Brodhag (2004) point to two, even three, different perspectives in relation to these principles. They describe the first approach in terms of what the authors call a “homo ecologicus” mindset, where the aim is to protect the life of all living things. Partisans of this approach promote a model of “strong sustainability” and oppose an economic system based on growth that cannot be sustainable if it threatens its ecological

capital (Passet, 1979). In this model, the economic sphere and the social sphere are embedded in the environmental sphere.

The second approach, that of “homo oeconomicus,” embodies a vision of sustainable development predicated on the maximization of economic indicators. Its partisans support a model of “weak sustainability” because nature has only an instrumental value for them and they believe that technological progress can repair any damage done to nature. They therefore see the economic sphere as encompassing the social and the environmental spheres.

The third vision represents a “revolutionary” position (Auclair 2011) that is at odds with the others and that is represented by the proponents of de-growth. However, whether the central priority is the environment or the economy, the social sphere is always “caught” between the two, and culture is nowhere to be seen.

A reflection on the theme of culture and sustainable development began to emerge starting in the 1990s. Then, in 2001, UNESCO adopted its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

Agenda 21 for Culture was adopted in 2004 at the Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona. It is based on the principles set out in UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. Over 350 cities, local governments and organizations from the world over agreed to adopt the agenda. The following year, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions cautioned against the danger of cultural standardization and impoverishment engendered by globalization. Article 1 of this Convention calls on governments to integrate “culture” and not just “cultural expressions” in their development policies. Nurse (2006) went even further, presenting culture as the “fourth pillar of sustainable development.”

### 3. Defining “culture”

While the cultural dimension was becoming increasingly present in the debates on sustainable development, there was some confusion regarding the definition itself of the term culture. The broader, anthropological meaning of culture refers to the notion of civilization (Auclair, 2011). All peoples have their own distinctive culture that must be preserved and promoted. For example, aboriginal peoples as well as

those from Africa, Australia and the Americas claim affiliation with distinct cultural communities, some of which are threatened with extinction. The narrower meaning of culture refers to different forms of artistic expression – i.e., the works created by people who practise art in an amateur or professional capacity. This latter acceptance of the term “culture” is that taken into consideration by what we generally refer to as cultural policies.

Initially, the debates concerning sustainable development were aimed primarily at protecting the planet from the excesses of industrialization and economic growth at any cost. Subsequently, the discussions began to include the issue of protecting the culture of developing countries, which, having come to be seen as mere suppliers of raw materials for wealthy countries, were in danger of losing their culture (in the anthropological meaning of the term). From there, an understandable shift occurred toward the protection of cultural expressions and, particularly, protection of the heritage of each of these cultures. What we can call a quantum leap occurred when this notion of protecting the heritage of developing countries was extended to include the heritage of wealthy countries, and, especially, to include the production of artistic works by professional artists living in these wealthy countries. It is interesting to note that Agenda 21 for Culture encompasses many of the exact same components found in virtually any cultural policy. Throsby mentions this on pages 368 and 369 of his article, but Blouët (2008, p. 21-22), in particular, underscores the commitments of Agenda 21 and the recommendations it makes to governments and notes their

striking resemblance to the content of existing cultural policies (see appendix). Thus, an issue that originally concerned North-South relations was gradually expanded to encompass the traditional demands of the professional artistic community.

The question that arises, therefore, is whether this is just an expedient way to move beyond the debate on cultural democratization.

### Conclusion

Sustainable development means thinking “globally” over time. It is easy to understand the appeal of this vision for the protection of humanity’s cultural heritage, and, by extension, for tourism, given that the main

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BELIEVE THAT THE DISCUSSION ON THE DEFINITION ITSELF OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE INCLUSION OF CULTURE AS A FOURTH PILLAR WARRANT FURTHER REFLECTION.”

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reason for travelling cited by tourists is to visit heritage sites.

But at the same time, we can also question whether this is not again, as highlighted by Urfalino (1989, 1997), just another strategy for justifying the role and place of culture in our society: "It is hypocritical, detrimental and useless to evoke democratization to justify support for arts institutions and professions" [translation]. Can we, today, replace the term "democratization" with the term "sustainable development"? The question is an interesting one and worth debating. Is it not dangerous to "cry wolf" too often? By seizing every opportunity and evoking every argument in the book to demand more support from governments, doesn't the cultural community risk undermining its credibility? Should we perhaps consider a return to the notion of "art for art's sake"? Should we not insist on the intrinsic benefits of art rather than instrumentalizing it by embracing all causes? And, especially, should we not feel a certain malaise at placing the protection of the cultures of poor countries on the same level as support for professional artistic activities in wealthy countries? For only a rich country can really afford to support a diversity of artistic activities carried out by citizens devoted to art on a full-time basis. Should we not simply redefine the notion of "cultural democratization" to encompass all forms of art, whether high or popular (Courchesne and Colbert, 2011)?

We believe that the discussion on the definition itself of sustainable development and the inclusion of culture as a fourth pillar warrant further reflection. This definition should take into account the quantity of cultural offerings in relation to the number of potential citizens as well as questions of governance, as aptly argued by Bonnet and Donato (2011). It is the responsibility of intellectuals, notably those who teach in cultural management programs, to engage in this discussion.

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## APPENDIX

(Source: Blouët, 2008, pages 21-22 [translation])

The undertakings are numerous and cover nearly every area of action found in cultural policies. Communities that adhere to Agenda 21 for Culture thus undertake to implement policies encouraging:

- cultural diversity;
- the development of cultural goods and services;
- the deployment of the creative capacity of all citizens;
- linguistic diversity;
- respect for artistic standards;
- the pursuit of and experimentation with new forms of expression;
- training;
- building audiences and encouraging their participation in culture;
- the democratic participation of citizens in the formulation, application and evaluation of public cultural policies;
- public funding of culture;
- the creation of a space for dialogue between the different spiritual and religious families;
- the refusal of any discrimination based on gender, age, ethnic origin, disability or poverty;
- the promotion of the continuity and development of indigenous local cultures and cultures from immigration;
- providing the means for immigrants to have access to and participate in the culture of the host community;
- the implementation of forms of “cultural impact assessment”;
- the consideration of cultural parameters in all urban and regional planning;
- promotion of the creation and use of public spaces in cities;
- defence of the principle of the right of all citizens to culture and knowledge;
- increasing the strategic role of cultural industries and local media;
- the promotion of the socialization of and access to the digital dimension;
- promotion of access to local public media;
- guaranteed freedom of speech;
- respect for and guaranteeing the moral rights of authors and artists;

- inviting creators and artists to commit themselves to the population;
- the promotion of books and reading;
- the public and collective nature of culture;
- the development of coordination between cultural and educational policies;
- guaranteeing that people with disabilities can enjoy cultural goods and services;
- the building of relations with universities, research centres and companies;
- the popularization of scientific and technical culture among all citizens;
- the protection of heritage and promotion of its discovery;
- multilateral processes based on the principle of reciprocity in a context of international cultural cooperation...

[p. 22]

The text of Agenda 21 for Culture then goes on to propose a number of recommendations to local, national and international governments, encouraging them to take action at their respective levels to:

- place culture at the centre of all local policies;
- make proposals for consultation with other institutional levels;
- propose a system of cultural indicators to facilitate the monitoring of the deployment of this Agenda 21 for Culture;
- establish instruments for public intervention in the cultural field and work to allocate a minimum of 1% of the national budget for culture;
- avoid trade agreements that place the free development of culture and the exchange of cultural goods and services on an equal footing;
- avoid the concentration of cultural and communication industries.
- implement international agreements on cultural diversity at the state or national level;
- recognize cities as the territories where the principles of cultural diversity are applied;
- incorporate cultural indicators into the calculation of the human development index (HDI);
- develop the cultural dimension of sustainability;
- exclude cultural goods and services from the negotiation rounds of the WTO;
- promote dialogue and joint projects which lead to a greater understanding between civilizations and the generation of mutual knowledge and trust, the basis of peace...