

POLICYBRIEF

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The Role of Multilateral and Regional Cooperation in Leveraging UNESCO's "Culture and Arts Education Framework for Sustainable Development"

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Highlights

- UNESCO's latest recommendations on education (2023, 2024a) emphasize learning through cultural diversity to overcome societal divisions and foster cross-cultural understanding in a world with rising conflicts.
- There's an urgent need to prioritize SDG target 4.7, ensuring learners acquire knowledge and skills for sustainable development, including human rights, peace, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity. Educational transformation should integrate a value-based approach alongside evolving learning methods.
- Culture and education play a fundamental role across all 2030 Agenda goals, ensuring they integrate social justice, humanistic and intercultural values, not just material improvements.
- Regional organizations are vital mediators between global aspirations for cross-cultural understanding and the unique contexts of their member states, especially those with a mandate in culture and education, to promote contextually relevant initiatives.

Culture and Education: Academic and Policy Debates

The interrelations between culture and education have been on the research agenda of social sciences for a long time, especially by focusing on how education outcomes improve when content, curriculum, methodologies, and learning environments are culturally relevant and responsive (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Concepts such as Ethnoeducation, Intercultural Education, Bilingual Intercultural Education, Multicultural Education, and others (Riedemann et al., 2020), are spread across disciplines and countries, as an expression of how cultural and linguistic diversity is a reality in all societies and demand positive recognition and targeted approaches as requisites for true democratic systems.

As a result, at the national and subnational policy levels of culture and education, interrelations have been the object of diverse interventions that often address separately migrant communities on the one side and indigenous, traditional, and other minority cultural communities on the other. Those can be grouped under two major policy lines – multiculturalism and interculturality – which stem from multilayered debate constituted by academic, social movements, and policy actors (Urteaga & García Álvarez, 2016).

While multicultural policies are mostly found in Anglo-Saxon liberal democracies, aimed at including and integrating migrants and cultural minorities, the intercultural perspective is stronger in the Global South, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, with policies stressing the need to democratise knowledge and education by transcending the sociopolitical, epistemic, cultural, and linguistic hierarchies that reproduce social exclusions originated in colonial and imperialist logics, with special attention to Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples (Urteaga & García Álvarez, 2016).

More recently, interculturality academics have directed critiques to intercultural policies, asking for differentiation between functional and critical interculturality (Riedemann et al., 2020). The former consists of recognising and respecting

terminology, multilateral texts are not exempt from multiculturalism and functional interculturality proposals. To reach a multilateral consensus, the international community has, therefore, opted for the “culture *and* arts education” title, a decision that emphasises their complementarity as two policy sectors, instead of a particular theoretical framework.

A possible way forward in integrating the values that have guided this recent rapprochement between both sectors is found in the concept of pluralism, which stands for the peaceful coexistence of diverse values, beliefs, and ways of life within a society, through the ability to find common ground despite differences (King, 2017). A useful working definition of pluralism is “a set of intentions and practices that seek to institutionalise recognition of difference and respect

for diversity as civic culture” (GCP, 2012) which requires mechanisms for different groups to negotiate their interests and find solutions that benefit all, based on a common commitment to fairness, justice, fundamental human rights, and democratic values. The adoption of a pluralistic lens and approach might support consensus-making between the different

policy approaches that may arise from the intercultural *versus* multicultural debate, or even between educational and cultural stakeholders, thus opening room for a new generation of holistic development policy where pluralism is seen “as an inherent part of development itself” (King, 2017, p. 2).

The Momentum of Culture and Education in the Multilateral Agenda

Differently from the education sector, with its dedicated SDG 4, culture does not hold a specific Sustainable Development Goal in the 2030 Agenda. According to Martinell (2015), this is due to a reticence of Member States to include in-depth discussions on culture, avoiding, in this manner, acknowledgement of the role played by cultural differences in contemporary international conflicts and the predominant model of economic development. Decades of UNESCO’s discussions on the role of culture within development, peace, and cooperation were dismissed in the major debates around sustainability, and nonetheless in the #culture2015goal campaign, led by different cultural networks globally advocating for a cultural SDG, culture remained at the

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cultural diversity, by integrating different groups within the existing social structure. It doesn’t delve into the underlying causes of inequality, maintaining compatibility with the current functioning of the political system, and is, thus, very similar to multicultural approaches. In contrast, critical interculturality puts system transformation as its very core, challenging power structures and economic models and pushing for a complete societal shift beyond just inclusion (Riedemann et al., 2020). In their analysis, common policies in the field of intercultural education since the early 2000s - like the creation of intercultural universities and the development of affirmative action policies to improve the access of historically marginalised groups to higher education - are not enough to sustain critical interculturality, since they do not promote systemic change, but rather highlight the existing boundaries between social groups (Urteaga & García Álvarez, 2016).

However challenging, the culture-and-education relationship has also increasingly gained space in the multilateral agenda, considered a possible and positive “answer to globalisation and interdependence” (Gundara & Portera, 2008, p. 467). Although there is a preference for vague “intercultural”

margin of the other sustainable development pillars – social, economic, and environmental.

After the 2030 Agenda approval, those stakeholders kept articulating, and during the first United Nations SDG Summit, in September 2019, they updated their campaign to #culture2030goal and launched a report on “Culture in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda” (Culture2030Goal Campaign, 2019). Through the former and other communication and advocacy strategies, actors in the cultural sector have, since then, insisted on a transversal approach to culture and sustainability (Culture Action Europe, 2017), stressing the cultural dimensions of all SDGs and enhancing intersectoral initiatives with closely related sectors, with education as one of them.

In parallel, multilateral talks on education have gained renewed attention in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with urgent calls to transform educational practices to address persistent and emerging challenges like fostering healthy learning environments, keeping pace with rapid technological change, fighting the climate crisis, and strengthening the civic and humanistic dimensions of education (Selwyn, 2021; Wolff, 2020). This was reflected in the launch of the Futures of Education Initiative by UNESCO, in 2021, grounded on a two-year consultation process with around 1 million stakeholders. The Initiative report stresses the need for a new social contract in education guided by the promotion of “human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 8) and paved the way for the Transforming Education Summit (TES), held in New York in September 2022. TES brought education transformation to the forefront of the multilateral agenda, stressing its character as “the great enabler” (Guterres, 2022), a global public good, and a fundamental right sustaining all other development objectives.

Soon enough, the education and culture sectors joined efforts to amplify their voices in the multilateral fora, beginning with the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT, which was held a few days after TES, on September 28-30 in Mexico City, forty years after its first edition, which had been hosted by this same city and country in 1982. Paragraph 13 of MONDIACULT 2022 final Declaration is fully dedicated to the complementary mandate of cultural and education sectors, asserting the “importance of enhancing synergies between culture and education, acknowledging the imperative of context-relevant education, which encompasses cultural heritage, history, and traditional

knowledge” (UNESCO, 2022).

During the same period, and adding to this momentum, the emergence and escalation of armed conflicts have brought to light the almost overlooked relevance of target 4.7 of SDG 4, which asks for a holistic education for sustainable development to be provided for all learners, including, among other requisites the “promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UN, 2015). Building on the spirit of target 4.7, UNESCO State Members approved on September 22, 2023, the Recommendation on education for peace and human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global citizenship, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023), which is a revised version of the 1974 Recommendation on similar topics.

In its new version, the Recommendation expresses the need for an education that commits to both cultural diversity and global citizenship, and promotes “a sense of connectedness and belonging to a common and diverse humanity and planet Earth” (UNESCO, 2023, annex, p. 6). An implicit theory of change is found there, where individuals who develop a deeper understanding, respect, and appreciation of cultural diversity through education will build a stronger sense of global citizenship and, therefore, commit to the protection and preservation of their common planet through sustainability practices.

Early this year, a step further was given in this direction, with the approval of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, resulting from the UNESCO World Conference on Culture and Arts Education, which gathered world Ministers of Culture and Education from 13 to 15 February 2024 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. This unprecedented bi-sectoral framework restates the need for “learning *in, through* and *with* cultural diversity for overcoming divisions and fostering mutual understanding” (UNESCO, 2024b), already included in previous international instruments, and goes beyond it, by comprehensively covering many dimensions through which culture and education should join forces to contribute to the 2030 Agenda, by providing policy recommendations for UNESCO Member States.

In the preamble, we identify the preoccupations that call for further collaboration between culture and education sectors

¹ The 1974 version was titled “Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.”

in this third decade of the 21st century: “a context of rising inequalities, armed conflict, disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination that fuel social divisions” (UNESCO, 2024a, p. 1). Coming from this, the document constitutes a clear statement for a valued-based education, that needs to accompany any attempt to transform learning modalities in a world deeply shaken by its current and foreseen challenges.

At an intermediate level between the multilateral fora and the Nation-States, regional organisations can accelerate the mediation process between the requirements of global citizenship and the singularities of local historical processes. The role is quite clear for sectoral regional institutions

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such as the Organisation of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI) or the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO), which hold specific mandates in education and culture; as well as geo-cultural organisations (Durez, 2014) like the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) or the Ibero-American General Secretariat, which build on educational and cultural cooperation as pillars of rapprochement among its members. However, the responsibility lies over any regional organisation guided by the principles and goals of the 2030 Agenda, particularly those nurturing a culture of peace and non-violence among its members.

Culture, Education and Their Reinforced Axiological Role in the 2030 Agenda

Culture and education, as two policy areas and international spheres, have come together to support a common view on the values and principles that must guide the work towards sustainable development goals. While the framework adopts the interculturality vocabulary, with terms like “intercultural dialogue” and “cultural diversity” as its basis, its general spirit is the promotion of pluralism as a set of core values to be fulfilled through culture and education combined policies.

Rather than treating culture and education as apolitical or neutral domains, the Framework expresses that quality education must address sociocultural and political challenges like “stigma, xenophobia, hate speech, disinformation, misinformation, and discrimination”. It requires embracing a critical intercultural or pluralistic approach that not only celebrates diversity but also interrogates systems of privilege and works to dismantle historical inequalities.

In this sense, SDG4 is strengthened as a goal in its own right, and culture and education together acquire a renewed recognition of their fundamental and axiological role across all SDGs, as both means and ends: pluralism policies for pluralist societies. The framework paves the way for a broader integration between culture and arts education

as the value and humanistic basis for development, appealing to policymakers and practitioners to apply this approach throughout the educational system, ensuring that all societies have “enhanced knowledge and the appreciation of cultural diversity, human rights, intercultural understanding and respect, social cohesion,

conflict prevention, and post-conflict reconciliation and healing through culture and the arts” (UNESCO, 2024a, p. 5). While the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education is directed towards Member States, this paper is aimed especially at regional organisations, “increasingly fundamental to the functioning of all aspects of world affairs from trade to conflict management” (Söderbaum, 2014, p. 9) and particularly to those actively involved in cultural and education policies, often connected to transnational civil society networks who can further support the dissemination of good practices.

Key Recommendations to Regional Organisations With a Mandate on Culture and Education

- Facilitate social dialogue on the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education and related international instruments, organising workshops and consultations to gather diverse perspectives on how cultural and artistic education can effectively address local, national, and regional challenges. Utilise feedback from this ongoing dialogue to develop regional guidelines aligned with the Framework, encompassing areas such as curriculum development, research and innovation,

community engagement, teacher training, and resource allocation for cultural and artistic programmes with a focus on education for a culture of peace, sustainable development, and intercultural dialogue.

- Encourage researchers and educators to initiate projects in cultural and artistic education for peace and development within the region. Provide incentives such as scholarships and funding for community engagement initiatives and facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration among higher education institutions, as well as through cultural and education networks operating transnationally.
- Invest in capacity building for educators through regional training programmes, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to integrate peace education, intercultural dialogue, critical thinking, and appreciation for cultural diversity into their teaching practices. When new programmes cannot be implemented at a regional level, promote a strategy to include culture & education components in teacher trainings already in place in each country.
- Promote the integration of cultural and artistic experiences into all aspects of student life within the regional context, fostering collaboration between education and cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, and art centres. This should count on the collaboration of higher education institutions and civil society networks to co-organise initiatives such as artist residencies, cultural events, and collaborative training or academic programmes that promote culturally sensitive approaches to learning and engagement.
- Identify the existing culturally sensitive programmes within the region and enhance their capacity to promote regional and global citizenship education, awareness of transnational issues and cross-cultural understanding. These programmes can then become drivers and multipliers of a regional value-based approach to the 2030 Agenda and particularly SDG target 4.7.
- Support student, youth-led initiatives and networks within the region to further promote cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and social justice; and combat hate speech, xenophobia, racism, biases, and all forms of discrimination and violence. Empower young people to take an active role in shaping culturally sensitive and equitable education systems within the regional context and beyond.

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