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Culture as a Sustainable Development Goal? The aesthetic experience of global citizenship as a strategy of cultural diplomacy

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Abstract

This article advocates for establishing 'culture' as the 18th Sustainable Development Goal (for the UN's SDGs) to strengthen long-term cultural diplomacy strategies. The author argues that while the current 17 SDGs address diverse global challenges, they lack explicit recognition of culture's fundamental role in fostering international cooperation and understanding diversity. Drawing on the UNESCO 2005 Convention and Achille Mbembe's concept of "dissimilitude", the author proposes that artistic and aesthetic spaces can create opportunities for experiencing global citizenship through *difference* rather than *assimilation*. The article critiques the heterogeneity of existing SDGs, noting how some goals reflect dominant economic systems that may perpetuate neoliberal and neo-colonial approaches. It contends that cultural and artistic practices uniquely enable individuals to connect their personal experiences with global contexts, fostering sustainable living through diverse perspectives. By establishing culture as an SDG, international cultural policy actors could create spaces where citizens could experience cultural diversity, transfer personal perspectives globally, and develop the cultural competencies necessary for addressing complex global challenges through inclusive, multi-perspectival approaches to sustainability.

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Introduction

In order to promote long-term cultural diplomacy strategies, this article calls for ‘culture’ to be established as the United Nation’s 18th ‘SDG’ (Sustainable Development Goal: cf. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs). Drawing on the history of the United Nations, and the significance of the UNESCO 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, this article argues for the immense importance of cultures and their aesthetic and artistic spaces for international cooperation and its negotiation processes. The concept of “dissimilitude”, expounded by Achille Mbembe (2017) is translated into a context of artistic and aesthetic spheres, relevant to my argument. By means of this context transfer, it is shown how art and culture can create spaces for the experience of a global citizenship — that can counter the differences and ambiguities of a world of diversity as a strategy of cultural diplomacy.¹

The United Nations Charter, signed in San Francisco on 26 June 1945, principally aimed for international peace. Seventy years later, with its ‘2030 Agenda’, the UN adopted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which supports the work of maintaining international peace but also aims to bring lasting change by introducing a multitude of new levels and perspectives (especially concerning the planetary environment).

The political process of reflection that began after the Second World War and establishment of the United Nations — and which was advanced by a multitude of discussions worldwide — has inevitably led to a broad range of conclusions.

¹ An earlier, modified version of the article has previously been published in German: Julius Heinicke (2022): ‘Kultur als Sustainable Development Goal?’, *Kulturelle Bildung online*: <https://www.kubi-online.de/index.php/artikel/kultur-sustainable-development-goal>

Nations and governments may not be able to maintain international peace on their own but together can now try to understand the world as a complex system in which humans live side by side with other organisms. First, it is interesting to note the different levels at which the Agenda operates. These are obvious in the five principles that precede the seventeen goals. The principles of ‘People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships’ (which already suggest cohesion in English due to the alliteration in both written and spoken form), refer to very different contexts and fields: people as actors, the planet that reacts to their actions (e.g. climate change), normative objectives such as peace and prosperity, ways of acting and living, such as partnership – these are all interlinked.

The heterogeneity of the SDGs despite the obvious dominance of certain systems

Looking at the different goals, in addition to very specific humanitarian aims (no poverty, zero hunger, quality education), it is noticeable that they contain ‘structural’ visions that can be understood and interpreted in very different ways. “Sustainable cities” and “industry, innovation and infrastructure” are included alongside ideas linked to specific economies, for example “economic growth” is paired with “decent work” in the eighth goal. The seventeen goals not only appear with different gestures and in a variety of guises but also refer to quite disparate value systems and basic assumptions. While no poverty, gender equality and zero hunger can be understood as ‘universal’ human rights, basic environmental rights are also listed within the area of sustainability (different forms of life, resources), while economic growth and industry refer to a totally different system.

Over recent years, the assumption has gained ground that, besides humans, other forms of life should also be granted fundamental rights. Despite the strategies of the Anthropocene, a new direction is visible here. Beyond this, however, certain ways of thinking have crept into the goals that *seem* to be universal, even if they belong to a system that is certainly not universal. Industry and

economic growth still clearly relates to an understanding of development policy whose penchant for added value, mass and progress is often deplored and criticised as neoliberal and at times even neo-colonial. Their existence is testament to the realisation, often ignored today, that prosperity as defined by the large industrial nations is based on economic ‘growth’ and thus comes at the expense of ecological and human resources; and that global universal prosperity, in the sense of this system, is an impossible utopian goal, even if “responsible production” is one of the SDGs. At second glance, the summary of the goals makes no secret of the structural advantage given to economically strong nations, which once again emphasises the limitations of current international initiatives for global justice. Sustainability affects all areas of life, but it can only be experienced and approached as a vision of cultural policy in cultural and, in particular, aesthetic and artistic spaces.

The potential of versatility

On the other hand, the versatility of the approaches and levels behind the SDGs illustrates the potential to break up one-sided gestures and reshape traditional systems within innovative international cooperation. The fight against hunger and poverty can be waged at different levels and with different concepts, and the protection of life below water and on land also makes economic value-added pale in favour of ecological sustainability, which must be approached jointly. Since all seventeen goals – on paper, at least – are on an equal footing, their diversity points to the need to approach them from many different perspectives, even if, as shown, some methods and strategies certainly dominate, and others are marginalised. In the context of the 2030 Agenda, the transformation that is so often called for is given a significant international and transdisciplinary scope – provided it is possible to bring together the different approaches and experiences of the global community and jointly develop local strategies for the respective contexts. This is certainly a large-scale and complex, but necessary undertaking.

It is important to use working methods from different disciplines and branches of science to tackle this undertaking, but recognising and experiencing diversity in its manifold dimensions and references plays a role in bringing together and understanding the many levels and approaches. This rather complex ability is a cultural one, as both the differences and similarities between societies are primarily generated through cultural practices, traditions and visions. This multifunctionality of culture can be seen, for example, in the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions adopted by UNESCO in 2005. The main “protection of cultural diversity” aim promotes the protection of cultural heritage and cultural traditions, while at the same time paying particular attention to marginalised practices and narratives that are repressed in global discourse. Meanwhile, the “promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions” focuses on the perception, experience and promotion of diversity as a social process.

Dissimilitude as a cultural competence of global citizenship

A fundamental cultural competence of global citizenship lies in actively understanding the interplay between “recognising and preserving diversity” and “promoting and experiencing diversity”, as this not only recognises the complexity of societies, but also initiates a responsible approach to social and cultural diversity. This requires, in equal measure, cultural policy visions and strategies and formats for cultural and artistic practice. Such a cultural policy vision should build on the UNESCO 2005 *Convention* and learn from the special content and programmatic composition of the SDGs described above. A global community can only survive sustainably – in an ecological, social, economic and societal sense – if it protects individual resources in their diversity, utilises the different experiences and strategies of societies and shares and links this responsibility collectively. The vision develops its strength not through the dominance of a particular discourse or understanding, but

through the diversity of approaches with the same goal: a sustainable world.

Fundamental to its design is an understanding (in terms of cultural policy) that I have discussed elsewhere with recourse to the concept of dissimilitude developed by Achille Mbembe as a narrative for a “universal society” (cf. Mbembe 2017; Heinicke 2019). In contrast to *assimilation*, dissimilitude focuses on difference, but with the aim of experiencing community through difference. In the context of the SDGs, which despite the aforementioned limitations at least attempt to take a broad perspective and in this way call for a sustainable world on very different levels and against the background of a multitude of paradigms, dissimilitude can be read as a community-building gesture of these multi-layered, sometimes contradictory processes: promoting the sustainability of the world in the diversity of its resources through and with the diverse forms of knowledge of different societies. Recognising the diversity of approaches along with the need for shared experience in all its difference lies in the refuge of culture and its artistic and aesthetic practices. This is where the link between cultural policy and cultural or artistic practice comes into play within an international cultural relations context.

Artistic and aesthetic practice as a place of dissimilar experience

Cultures and their artistic and aesthetic practices can sustainably meet the current challenges posed by the complexity of the world and its societies, as illustrated by the SDGs. “World” means humanity and nature and their well-being, but also the cultural practices that create and shape the connections between people and nature in the first place.

This broader understanding has several consequences. On the one hand, the artistic and aesthetic can integrate the diversity of cultures and approaches to the world in a more programmatic fashion. This becomes clear, for example, through the reflection and specific contextualization of individual SDGs. Poverty and culture, for example, not only have different

meanings in different areas of society, but there are also different strategies for combating poverty or creating sustainable educational structures. Art is able to make the multi-perspectivity behind the SDGs and the respective local approaches recognizable and understandable. Knowledge about diversity is a crucial competence of global citizenship.

Artistic, playful and aesthetic spaces for experience and reflection can be created in which the individual participants experience their role within the socio-ecological responsibility of a sustainable world and thus experience and feel their global citizenship. It is primarily about the experience of a vision of sustainability that is formed when the “I” experiences its own diversity and position in relation to its individual relationships with the world (to other cultures, nature, education systems, knowledge, wealth, food – as illustrated by the SDGs). Regarding one’s own actions, this means the diversity of one’s personal experience should not be reduced to a single form, shade or narrative in the sense of assimilation. Rather, it is a case of taking responsibility for and experiencing the diverse relationships, also in relation to the environment.

My grandparents’ experience of migration creates a relationship with people with a recent history of flight; my queer identity allows me to take a certain stance on the urgency of gender justice worldwide; my dissatisfaction with ‘methods’ in my school days strengthens my interest in forms of education from other cultures; the dying forests in my region heighten my responsibility towards trees in the Amazon. Arts education can specifically develop artistic, playful and aesthetic formats in which the diverse experiences of one’s own past are linked with the countless global contextualisations contained in the SDGs. The SDGs act both as a point of reference for our own immediate environment and biography and as a gateway to the world of experiences, assumptions and challenges of global cultures and societies.

The ability to transfer one’s own background and experiences into the world is a driver of sustainable living, even it comes at the risk of the “I” becoming “dissimilar” to the immediate

environment because the diversity (and not the homogeneity) of personal experience is emphasised and initiated in favour of global connections. This is because it not only enables people to take responsibility for their local area and region, but also to relate their own experiences to global contexts. The creation of these experiential links with the help of the artistic and cultural spaces of arts education also promotes a realization of the limitations of one's scope for action and experience in one's own sphere, which, however – as these relational experiences make clear – interact directly and indirectly with other spaces in the world. The assumption that the SDGs can be fully implemented remains an illusion here too, but the basic gesture of being able to adopt their broad perspective, including their various links and relationships, and view them as a separate area of responsibility is significantly supported by these formats. The ability to transfer one's own experience into the world is a driver of sustainable living.

Culture as a Sustainable Development Goal: a sustainable strategy for cultural diplomacy

Sustainability affects all areas of life, but it can be experienced and approached as a strategy of cultural diplomacy primarily in cultural and, in particular, aesthetic and artistic spaces. However, the SDGs only reflect this fundamental function and task of culture in their respective explanations and on a more cultural-sociological meta-level. It is true that a reference to culture can be established for almost each of the objectives, but it seems necessary that this fundamental place, where not only the relationship of a society to nature and the world, but also the diversity of approaches and explanations can be experienced and reflected upon, should be the 18th goal. Culture as an SDG would not only refer to the "Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expression", but also to the ability to *use cultural practices to understand the diversity of the world and its resources as a sustainable goal*. Cultural policy now must formulate this goal for the community. This is where cultural diplomacy comes into play once again.

If international cultural policy actors succeed in understanding this cultural goal as a place where the diversity of cultures can be experienced, where citizens are given the opportunity to transfer their own perspectives and experiences into the world and share them with those of others, then an important strategy of cultural diplomacy will be strengthened. In this way, ambiguities are not only experienced but also located and sustained in one's own reference system. International issues are contextualised globally and locally, and culture is understood not as a closed, but as an open system.

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