Background Document
Workshop @Academy: AHEAD OF THE CURVE w/ Mike van Graan

Introduction

This Background Document aims to provide a context for the seminar which will be held on 19-20 May 2017 in Berlin at the Robert Bosch Academy.

The purpose of the seminar is to gather thinkers, activists and/or representatives of key civil society organisations to consider the changes that are taking place within the global economic, political, cultural and other spaces, and to evaluate and reinvigorate the contemporary meaning and relevance of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions to this changing world both now and in the years to come.

The seminar takes place shortly before the meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) of the Convention in Paris in June, and it may be that some of the ideas and themes that emerge from the seminar, could feed both into the COP (12-15 June 2017) and the Intergovernmental Committee (IGC) meeting (11-14 December 2017).

Conditions at the time of the Convention’s adoption and initial implementation

The conditions that gave rise to the Convention were the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in the late eighties, heralding the end of the bipolar “Cold War” era and the rapid rise of market liberalisation as the dominant paradigm for global and regional trade.

The establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in the 1990s facilitated the dominance of “free market” thinking with rules and regulations limiting government intervention in the market place and reducing, if not eliminating, protectionism of local industries. The adoption of the General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS) in 1995 was a catalyst to set the Convention negotiations in motion in order to ensure that the cultural and audio-visual sectors would not be included in progressive trade liberalisation.

Against this background, it was argued that while this economic paradigm was acceptable for products such as motor vehicles, clothing and chemical products, cultural expressions, audio-visual goods and services and the creative industries in the broader sense could not be subjected to such unrestricted market liberalisation without grave consequences for democracy globally, for cultural diversity and for expressions of national identity.
The argument emphasised that embedded within creative goods such as films and television programmes, were values, ideas, ideological assumptions and ways of seeing the world, so that if the free market were to prevail in an unrestricted manner, creative products from dominant economies would flood the markets of less resourced countries, and consumers of these products would imbibe – whether consciously or unconsciously – the values, perspectives and ideas embedded within them. This would lead to greater homogenisation – viewed as unacceptable at a time that encouraged and celebrated “diversity”. (Our Creative Diversity – the Perez de Cuellar report - had been launched as UNESCO’s think piece in response to the end of the Cold War).

Thus, it was necessary to have an international legal instrument that would allow governments to support and promote (e.g. through subsidies) and protect (e.g. through local product quota systems) their creative industries and the public value of culture, without this being regarded as unfair market interventions by the state. In this way, the sovereign right to public policies for arts and culture would be re-affirmed.

By supporting the creation and distribution of a range of creative products, citizens would have choices as they would have access to local, regional and international creative goods.

The movement towards developing a Convention that would promote and sustain global heterogeneity and protect cultural diversity began to build steam in the late 90s with the launch of the International Network for Cultural Policy (INCP), a global network of arts and culture ministers from strategic countries as well as civil society counterparts such as the International Network for Cultural Diversity (INCD) and Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (formalised as the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity in 2007).

World leaders met at the turn of the century in New York and agreed on eight goals that would help to lift millions out of poverty. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – with 2015 as their deadline – included halving poverty, the reversal of the spread of HIV and basic education for everyone, especially girls – required significant funding from all, particularly wealthy, nations. Global South initiatives such as the World Social Forum launched in Port Alegre in Brazil, took up this agenda and added new perspectives and dynamism to development dialogues.

While the MDGs did not include culture either as an influencer or means of development, the Convention built on earlier, vast amounts of UNESCO work that recognised the links between culture and development.
In September 2001, the terror attack on the World Trade Centre in New York initiated the “war on terror”, led principally by the USA. Just a week after “9/11”, UNESCO Member States adopted a Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, built mainly on the thinking and ideas articulated by Amartya Sen and his colleagues.

The Convention was adopted formally in 2005 and gained rapid approval from a critical mass of member states, entering into force in March 2007.

By then, the “war on terror” and the backlash it unleashed with increasing terror attacks had at least two effects on the political context in which the Convention was being brought to life:

a. massive resources were channeled towards the military and/or “homeland security” so that the pursuit and funding of the MDGs were adversely affected and

b. the notion of “cultural diversity” began to lose its appeal as the “war on terror” was increasingly framed as “a clash of civilisations”; “multiculturalism” was questioned as a political and social strategy for co-existence, with greater insistence on the need for all within a country to abide by the dominant values of that society. From one perspective, it appeared that while some countries were demanding and using the language of “diversity” at an international level to promote and protect their share of the global market in the trade of cultural goods and services, they were increasingly reluctant to maintain or apply the principle of diversity within their own societies.

While there were exceptions, the 2008 financial crises and subsequent economic recession further reduced public sector funding for development and for the implementation of the Convention’s policy goals in many countries.

On the other hand, the publication of UNCTAD’s 2008 and 2010 Creative Economy Reports shifted the emphasis from public sector support to the creative industries as means to generate the resources required for social and human development. The Reports projected positive messages about the resilience of the creative industries in the light of the economic recession, their capacity to create jobs and their ability to earn foreign income.

With the deadline for the MDGs approaching, and on the back of funding and conference initiatives by the European Commission e.g. the 2009 Culture as a Vector of Development conference in Brussels, the creative industries assumed greater importance in policy-making in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. The 2013 UNDP/UNESCO special edition of the Creative Economy Report focused on developments in the Global South and reaffirmed the connection between artistic creation, cultural resources and the cultural,
often informal, economies. This was despite conditions in many Global South countries not being conducive to the growth and sustainability of creative industries given the lack of investment in infrastructure and capacity-building, the absence of markets with the critical mass to support such industries and the lack of entrepreneurial skills and access to capital.

This particular period gave new meaning to “the cultural dimension of development” and breathed greater life into the 2005 Convention as an instrument that promoted and facilitated regional trade, investment and capacity-building in the creative industries globally.

**Implementation of the Convention**

Member states were required to submit quadrennial reports (2012/13 and again in 2016/17) detailing how they had implemented the Convention, and the UNESCO Convention Secretariat oversaw the production of two reports on the impact of the Convention.

What these reports reveal is that the implementation results of the Convention have been – at best – uneven and mixed, with wealthier, mainly European and Latin American countries having generally done a good job in pursuing the Convention's goals, building on already-existing policies and instruments, while poorer countries have done less well in advancing the Convention's objectives.

Furthermore, there is a distinct divide between countries with a democratic political culture and those (the majority) with a more authoritarian or hybrid political regime so that civil society organisations have been more engaged in implementing and evaluating the Convention's impact in democratic societies, while – notwithstanding the requirement of the Convention for civil society actors to be actively engaged - it has mainly been the state or agencies of the state that have reported (generally positively) on the Convention in less democratic states.

**Current conditions and key challenges to the Convention's objectives and principles**

Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the end of 2015 as “Agenda 2030”; as with the earlier MDGs and notwithstanding the advocacy efforts of key regional and global cultural players, culture was not given as significant recognition as an influencer of or strategy in the pursuit of the SDGs as the cultural sector would have hoped.
However, in the current SDG framework, cultural diversity, artistic creation, cultural resources and creativity are strong connectors of seven of these goals: addressing transition and innovation in high quality life-long learning, gender equality, humane work and growth, preferential treatment to reduce inequalities between countries, inclusive, sustainable and resilient development of cities and settlements, the building of strong participatory institutions and global partnerships. The practical implications of this understanding are yet to be seen.

Another moment of “global hope” presented itself in 2010/2011 as the so-called Arab Spring led to the fall of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, with further democratisation ripples being felt in other countries in the region. However, other than some political shifts in Tunisia, much of the region remains under repressive rule, or with violent conflicts and wars characterising much of their recent history.

The increase in terror activities since September 2001 and especially since 2015, the rise of ISIS in the Arab region and the threat that it is perceived to pose as well as the ongoing wars and political instability in countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, have further impacted adversely on economic resources, on security measures (which have been tightened) and on global mobility (with artists from many Global South countries finding it increasingly difficult to obtain visas to access Global North markets, notwithstanding the Convention’s promotion of preferential access to such markets for creative goods and services from less-resourced economies).

The internet and the rapid growth of social media over the last twenty years have had significant and positive impacts on the democratisation of knowledge, in the distribution of ideas and even in effecting political change (as with the role of social media in the “Arab Spring”). But while digitisation and social media have contributed to economic growth, greater inclusiveness of people in social and economic spheres and global connectedness, inequalities in economic, political, military and cultural power are also manifested in the digital world with citizens in wealthier countries connected at greater speeds and at cheaper costs than those in less-resourced countries. As with culture which does not have a wholly positive or wholly negative impact, so social media and the internet are not in themselves good or bad, and, as with the spread of fake news, social media and the internet may be used as tools towards good ends and bad, and to serve particular interests.

2016 has seen major ruptures within “western” democratic societies, spilling over into 2017 with increasing calls for more nationalistic and culturally nostalgic and chauvinist approaches demanded by electorates who have made their voices heard in the Brexit vote and in the rise of Trump in the USA.
Some of the premises for the post-Berlin Wall world – increased multilateralism and cooperation, greater globalisation, more rapid market liberalisation – are being questioned as a consequence of job losses at local levels, perceived mass migration and security threats – real and imagined – posed by migrants and refugees. These phenomena are not peculiar to the Global North, and are, for example, also manifested in countries such as South Africa and Chile.

Notwithstanding the scientific evidence affirming climate change and its devastating impacts, major corporates and governments are paying little regard to the science in favour of short-term wealth gains for elites. Changes in the climate are contributing to losses of traditional and contemporary forms of economic sustenance, to cultural changes and to increased migration.

Free trade agreements, the outsourcing of labour to cheaper parts of the world and the relatively easy mobility of labour across national boundaries – features of neo-liberal economic thought – are being called into question, no longer only by civil society activists, but by politicians in response to the concerns of their broader electorate. Whether this is a temporary manifestation of voter concerns in some countries or issues that will have longer-term impact with new trade constellations being formed, remains to be seen. Decades-old military and political alliances are not as certain as before, and – led by the USA president’s drive for even greater expenditure on the military, it is likely that public spending on development and culture – two core tenets of the 2005 Convention – will decline in the foreseeable future (see, for example, Trump’s recent budget that eliminates funding for the National Endowment for the Arts).

Multilateral institutions of global or regional governance and collective action – e.g. the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, the International Criminal Court, UNESCO – are facing unprecedented challenges so that the gains made over the last number of decades to create institutional frameworks for creating and upholding international law, are being threatened.

**Conclusion**

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of apartheid in the late eighties and nineties, and the hope that was ushered into the world – at least in the so-called west – we have become more unequal in economic terms with the gap between rich and poor nations, between rich regions and poor regions and within nations, growing larger and larger, fuelling tensions and conflicts and escalating the possibilities of a new arms race.
Politically, the world has new divides, but with powerful nations still exerting power in multilateral forums such as the United Nations’ Security Council, with little prospect of change if such changes threaten the geo-political and security interests of those who now enjoy veto rights at the Security Council. There are greater moves towards authoritarian forms of government, with adverse consequences for freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom to impart ideas so that most people in the world live in “un-free” societies. Democratic governments are being pushed by their electorates towards policies and practices that have less to do with human solidarity, fundamental human rights and freedoms and a better quality of life for all the world’s citizens, and are more informed by anxiety about loss and ignorance and fear of “the other”. Racism and deep religious divides threaten any sense of common humanity or even the possibilities of co-existence of diverse cultural communities.

The world is a very different place to the one ushered in by the collapse of the Berlin wall, but it is still in the process of becoming a different place, a world that is characterised by deep political, economic, military, social and cultural inequalities on the one hand, and on the other hand, by quite different belief systems, values, traditions and forms of social organisation (in short, culture). As opposed to the demand for greater cultural diversity at the time of the formulation of the Convention, there is a greater demand now for cultural homogeneity at national level and for shared/common values that serve particular views of the world and the interests that underpin such views.

It is in this changing world that supporters and advocates of the Convention need to remake the meaning and relevance of the Convention, and to determine how, if at all, the Convention can contribute to shaping this changing world. This rather tough and certainly also controversial assessment spurred the need for this peer-to-peer, multi-continent workshop in Berlin where participants may debate this question from their various perspectives and experiences.

While the contemporary world may present substantial challenges, it may also offer significant opportunities. It is precisely in some of the political ruptures currently taking place that space is being opened for new activism, or for the reawakening of activism as witnessed, for example, in the Women’s March after Trump’s inauguration, for new generations to manifest political engagement, for strategic investment in investigative journalism, for rethinking models of democracy, and, not least for humour, satire and the arts to make sense and provide commentary on this unfolding state of affairs.
Questions for consideration by Seminar participants

1. In response to the background paper, what do you believe are the key economic, political, ecological and cultural changes taking place at national, regional and global levels? Is there a shift towards greater authoritarianism and less cognisance of fundamental human rights and freedoms? How should we understand and interpret these changes? Might these developments result in permanent or temporary changes, and what will be their short-, medium and long-term impacts as far as the key objectives and principles of the 2005 Convention are concerned?

2. What would you consider to be the key cultural priorities of your country, of your region and your country’s/region’s relationship with other regions i.e. Africa, Europe, the Arab world, Asia, Latin America, North America, etc? How do these priorities overlap with/differ from the objectives of the 2005 Convention?

3. What, in your view, are the key challenges for broadening support for, and implementing the 2005 Convention in our unfolding world from the different points of view of stakeholders such as government, civil society and the private sector?

4. What may be the key opportunities for the 2005 Convention in our unfolding world? How may the 2005 Convention and its various mechanisms (COP, IGC, UNESCO Secretariat, civil society partners, etc) help to shape this unfolding world?

5. Against the background of the above, what should be the priorities for supporters and advocates of the 2005 Convention in the next five years and why? Provide as concrete and practical examples as possible.
Selected Readings


Operational guidelines for the implementation of the Convention:

World Day for Cultural Diversity:

Reshaping Cultural Policies: An evaluation of the implementation of the Convention
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002428/242866e.pdf