

# Transforming Our World: Achieving the 2030 Agenda through Culture and Education

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Through these pages, we will review the connections between culture, education and sustainable development and analyse what each person's contribution and role could be in the transformation sought by the 2030 Agenda. In an increasingly globalised world, the origins, knowledge and traditions of the communities should be respected and protected as a fundamental part of sustainable development. Similarly, to achieve the goals proposed by the 2030 Agenda, we should move towards an education that enables us to acquire knowledge and promote habits in harmony with nature. Similarly, art has the ability to become a stimulant and driver of social change by appealing to our deepest emotions. Only through these tools can we complete the process of emotional and social transformation necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

*Culture is who we are, and what shapes our identity.  
Placing culture at the heart of development policies is the only way  
to ensure a human-centred, inclusive and equitable development.*  
Jyoti Hosagrahar, Director of the Division of Creativity at UNESCO

## **Towards a Culture for Sustainable Development**

The concept of culture as such has evolved from its most classical meaning, associated with tangible heritage, until the most current, which, according to UNESCO, “should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art

and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” And on this path UNESCO has played a significant role in defending the recognition, promotion and protection of the cultural diversity of the world, as if it were a natural ecosystem.

The first important milestone on the path was achieved in Mexico, in the World Conference on Cultural Policies<sup>1</sup> in 1982. On this occasion it was argued that “every culture

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1. UNESCO, *World Conference on Cultural Policies*, Paris, 1982, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000052505>

represents a unique and irreplaceable body of values since each people's traditions and forms of expression are its most effective means of demonstrating its presence in the world. Cultural identity and cultural diversity are inseparable. Hence recognition of the presence of a variety of cultural identities wherever various traditions exist side by side constitutes the very essence of cultural pluralism.”

*Communities should understand their past and who they are in the present. Furthermore, the origins, knowledge and traditions shared by the different communities should be respected and protected in an increasingly globalised world*

The 1990s saw the publication of the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, led by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary General of the United Nations. In this report, entitled *Our Creative Diversity*,<sup>2</sup> two major ideas stand out for the matter at hand. The first is the importance of identity and cultural diversity as the basis for the development of peoples, also discussed in Mexico in 1982. In order to define the future, communities should understand their past and who they are in the present. Furthermore, the origins, knowledge and traditions shared by the different communities should be respected and protected in an increasingly globalised world. The second has to do with global ethics and the value of culture in pursuit of them, an issue that we will develop a little later.

The third of the fundamental UNESCO documents is the Universal Declaration on

Cultural Diversity,<sup>3</sup> which was published in 2002. The document declares cultural diversity a common heritage of humanity and urges countries to ensure harmonious interaction between the diverse cultural identities that exist within them.

Both in the World Conference on Cultural Policies and in the report *Our Creative Diversity* or the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, culture features as a factor sine qua non for social and economic development. However, it was in the Hangzhou International Congress in 2013 where it was more clearly linked with sustainable development, which includes a social, economic and environmental dimension.

The term *sustainable development* is defined as that which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>4</sup> Since 1972, the international community has debated and managed this concept until, finally, it materialised in the 2030 Agenda “Transforming Our World” and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), approved by 195 countries in the UN General Assembly of September 2015. Two years earlier, in Hangzhou (China), participants in the congress organised by UNESCO signed a declaration expressing their firm belief that culture is the fourth pillar of sustainable development along with the social, economic and environmental pillars.

Finally, and despite the efforts of many international professionals in the cultural sector, a specific SDG was not achieved and culture is barely mentioned in some of the 17 goals. Alfons Martinell carried out a meticulous and rigorous analysis of the causes of this omission<sup>5</sup> and concluded by affirming that the cultural

2. UNESCO, *Our Creative Diversity. World Commission on Culture and Development*, Paris, 1996, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000105586>

3. UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, Paris, 2002, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000128347>

4. UN, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

dimension should cut across all the goals and that it should play a fundamental role in achieving them.

## The Transformation of Identity, Narratives and Values

To achieve the 2030 Agenda, the world as we know it should transform dramatically and on a large scale. We should change the exploitation of resources, production and distribution chains, consumption, mobility, commercial laws... And this will only happen if, at the same time, three specific issues intrinsic to culture change: identity, values and narratives.

### A change of identity

Identity is everything that we are individually and as a society. It is a changing concept that is gradually being constructed. It differs depending on the cultural ecosystem that we inhabit and the elements that make it up: its specific values, own knowledge, modes of education, artistic manifestations, the tangible and intangible heritage surrounding us, or the landscapes we grow up in. Ultimately, the cultural diversity that UNESCO seeks to protect and promote is the same that gives us our identity. However, in recent decades, cultures have tended to become homogenised and thus lose their diversity in a process that has many similarities with natural ecosystems. We could almost say that a characteristic of this Anthropocene geological era is the ability of the human being to put an end to what is different so that everything is the same. Landscapes of cultural, educational, social, economic and, of course, environmental monocultures prevail.

If we think about what the dominant cultural ecosystem and, therefore, the contemporary global identity is today, it could be defined with two terms: production and consumption. Faced with those early hunter-gatherers with animist beliefs, who were our ancestors, today's *sapiens* have an anthropocentric view of the world that raises them to the status of superior beings, leaving the rest of nature with a passive and secondary role at the service of human beings.

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The philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood argued that, to put an end to this anthropocentrism, we have to ask what it means to be human and what prejudices underlie our collective consciousness that converts other beings into “non-humans”, impeding a peer-to-peer relationship. Recognising these beings as active subjects with their own narratives would put us back “within nature” and, thus, we would stop talking about it in the third person to feel part of a whole. This is precisely the change that the SDGs seek, a concept of holistic life, the same one that the biologist Sandra Myrna Díaz talks about when she affirms: “All living beings are made from the same atoms, which have been woven, unwoven and interwoven for millions of years.”<sup>6</sup>

### The construction of a new value system

Jeffrey Sachs, professor at Columbia University, director of the Sustainable Development Solu-

5. A. Martinell, “¿Por qué los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible no incorporan la cultura?”, in A. Martinell (coord.) et al., *Cultura y Desarrollo Sostenible. Aportaciones al debate sobre la dimensión cultural de la Agenda 2030*, Madrid, REDS, 2020.

6. <https://www.fpa.es/multimedia-es/videos/discurso-de-sandra-myrna-diaz-en-la-ceremonia-de-2019.html?idCategoria=3&idSubcategoria=0>

tions Network (SDSN) and one of the architects of the SDGs, argues that sustainable development has to become a “deep social norm”; in other words, an essential part of the values, beliefs and modes of behaviour that society as a whole must adopt and interiorise. An understanding of sustainability as the right path, the only one possible, fair and responsible, should be instilled in citizens as a deep social norm, mainly through culture and education.

Sachs is also the main author of the report on the six transformations that should be undertaken to carry out a transition to sustainable development, and that cover a large part of global, regional and local dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

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We will focus on the first of the transformations mentioned, called “education, gender and inequality”, where Sachs advocates an education for transformation. Its objective is to train citizens to make them aware of the challenges of sustainable development and of the types of global cooperation necessary to achieve the globally agreed goals. It is not, therefore, about a simple improvement in universal access to education, but a 180 degree shift in the content, to move towards an education that makes it possible to acquire the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary to promote sustainable habits and in harmony with nature, as stated in the 2030 Agenda. This means taking educational processes – formal and non-formal, compulsory and lifelong – one step further to turn them into tools of this massive, trans-

formative, disruptive change, towards a new global value system; one that recognises the profound connection we have with the rest of the planet’s inhabitants and how our wellbeing also depends on the happiness and prosperity of all of them.

But what should those universal values be? In the environmental humanities there is already talk of an “environmental ethics” (Riechmann) and some of its elements are being defined, such as cultural and biological diversity, appreciation of the local, the enjoyment of the beautiful and the building of solid ties with our (human and non-human) congeners. José Albelda adds the idea of “ecological transition”, with values such as the re-evaluation of our relationship with nature, austerity as a way of life, the politics of the common good and the understanding of nature as “free” and the worshipping of “untouched” nature.<sup>8</sup>

## Narratives

The last question has to do with the search for new narratives in the face of the failure of the current ones. Narratives reflect how human beings understand the world, but how are these new narratives created? And, above all, how are the current ones left behind?

Gorka Espiau, member of the team of the Agirre Lehendakaria Center for Social and Political Studies, works on and researches changes of narratives. In his view, narratives are the instruments we use to organise our ideas and understand the world around us. There are, however, different levels. The first are visible narratives, what we tell, what we say. Then there are the hidden ones, which are those we decide not to tell for different reasons (inconsistencies with what we say, experiences of failure...). Finally, meta-narratives are the

7. <https://reds-sdsn.es/6-transformations>

8. J. Albelda, J. M. Parreño and J. M. Marrero Henríquez (coords.), *Humanidades ambientales. Pensamiento, arte y relatos para el Siglo de la Gran Prueba*, Madrid, La Catarata, 2018.

ideas that operate beneath, without us realising it, but that crucially influence our behaviour or our decision-making. It is therefore this last level, that of the meta-narrative, that should be changed in order to systematically transform identities, values and narratives.

## Culture, Art and Education as Levers of Change

With all this, how can current values be replaced with this environmental ethics? What can be done to advance towards a global identity that highlights the intangible versus the tangible? What are the mechanisms to change meta-narratives and create new narratives that speak of a better world for all, that lead us to a new global value system? And, above all, how can meaningful learning that will help produce that disruptive, massive and transformational change that our world requires be built?

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In this respect, artistic manifestations – a fundamental part of all cultures – act as a bridge between the two shores. In my more than 12 years mediating between art and public, I have been able to see the potential that the artwork has as a point of meeting and dialogue for other possible identities, values and narratives. As the Uruguayan artist and pedagogue Luis Camintzer says, art is a place where you can think of things that are not thinkable elsewhere.

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exceptional ability to communicate symbolically, which allows us to adopt new perspectives and ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, as well as our habits.

Miranda Massie, director of the Climate Museum, argues that we as a species are not evolutionarily prepared to deal with the scope of climate change and its consequences. This problem caused by each and every one of us (to a greater or lesser extent) is so recent and of such magnitude that it escapes our individual understanding. Therefore, we need to process it collectively to be aware that we are at a turning point in our history on Earth; accepting the responsibility we have as a civilisation for the current state of the planet and its inhabitants, and from there creating a culture of cooperation to identify collective solutions to the highly complex problems we face.

Culture and education together have the potential to accelerate change towards that new global community with identities, values and narratives based on sustainability. Both are points of reflection and learning where people talk, listen, think and act. They then become points from which to start that collective process of appropriation, transformation and action. Ultimately, they are the basis on which to build this new global citizenry, which respects and protects its own cultural and natural diversity, and understands its place and function in the world.

Social transformation is ultimately an emotional process. People at a given moment react, become motivated and are empowered, thereby changing their lifestyle. As the world gets smaller and more complex, we need that art, that culture and those educational systems that make us think and feel, that provide us with a profound emotional knowledge of reality, inspiring and helping us to understand who we are as a species and how we have reached this situation.



Painting by Abraham Lacalle (Marlborough Gallery).