

Agenda 2030 and Culture

How the cultural sector can become a 'global good' for sustainable development

In September 2022, UNESCO organised a conference called *Mondiacult* in Mexico, to explore the relationships between cultural policy and sustainable development, looking towards the next sustainable development programme that will replace Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in 2030. How can the cultural sector – particularly museums, galleries, libraries and archives – relate to the Agenda and the SDGs?

By Henry McGhie

Agenda 2030 and the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) are sometimes criticized, at least by some in the cultural and heritage sectors, for not giving enough attention to culture and cultural participation. However, working to support the Agenda is not just about finding the cultural sector within the goals and targets, but applying the cultural sector to helping achieve the Agenda and the SDGs, using its unique position in society – and its rights-based opportunities and responsibilities – to do so. In the context of rights and rights-based approaches, culture does not equal the cultural sector, but the full range of ways in which people and groups interact, including social norms and customs, that make up everyday life.

SDG 11.4, strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, is well-known for having a clear link to the work of museums and other cultural institutions. However, there are many, many more opportunities for the cultural sector to help achieve the SDGs. Cultural considerations, heritage and participation are more or less part of many additional SDG targets. [1] Arguably, cultural considerations and participation are essential for the achievement of most or even all SDG targets and certainly for all goals, and education is certainly essential for all goals and most targets.

Sustainability in cultural institutions

So how is the cultural sector working with sustainable development? It is increasingly interested in and concerned with sustainability issues, but there is a long way to go for it to fully realise its potential to contribute to sustainable development.

For decades, the cultural sector has not been well connected to sustainable development agendas of obvious relevance and thus are scarcely factored into the work of the cultural sector. Why is this? We may contrast the cultural sector with the business sector. The business sector realised that they had issues with public trust and had to act. This resulted in well-developed corporate social responsibility schemes and reporting.

Sustainability, as thought of in its older sense and as is widely used in the cultural sector, is about securing a better balance of social, environmental and economic aspects. However, the term can be problematic as it has many different definitions, and people – even in the same conversation – may not be considering the sustainability of the same thing. For instance, discussion of sustainability in museums and the cultural sector may be referring to the ability of an organisation to balance its budget, to reduce its environmental impact, or any number of other things. In any case, in this older sense, sustainability is about reducing the negative impact of what you do, that is, the do-no-harm approach. This approach is problematic as it often results in organisations – cultural and otherwise – considering sustainability action as being about taking an activity and working to reduce its environmental impact in order to make the activity more sustainable. Why is this a problem? For three main reasons: firstly, that you are either sustainable or you are not, and more sustainable usually only means less unsustainable, so it can be very misleading. The second reason for considering the do no harm approach as problematic is that it doesn't make you question the real value of doing the activity in the first place. If in a world of many challenges we are working on an activity that creates little or no public value as a result, but making the activity more sustainable, we would have been better working on one of the bigger challenges to really make a difference. The old-fashioned do no harm approach doesn't make us look at the world where our work makes a difference. The third reason that this approach to sustainability is problematic is that it is often thought of as being about resources, and using them carefully. As mentioned above, sustainable development is about securing human rights for everyone and promoting social justice, as well as protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

There is a better way, and that is to aim to both do more good and do less harm. This is more in line with the sustainable development approach, that acknowledges that sustainability is

hard to define, and means different things, but is still our ultimate goal. Sustainable development is the action and the pathway that helps us get there. Sustainable development is about acknowledging the positive benefits we bring to the world, and the negative impacts. It is also about acting to enhance those positive benefits and reduce the negative impacts. Working with sustainable development requires us to firstly understand where our work makes a difference, and understanding the social, economic and environmental challenges there, and developing programmes that address those challenges, ideally together, to reduce the challenges and to unlock untapped potential.

Do more good and do less harm

The cultural sector can contribute to sustainable development, both by enhancing its positive benefits and reducing its negative impacts, for instance by shifting cultural activity to be part of low-carbon lifestyles and practices. For museums, the institutions I work with most, we can consider the following scheme as a localisation of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs to the sector:

- **Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, both in museums and more generally:** Ensuring that collections and other cultural heritage resources support sustainable development, for example by being meaningful to all of society and accessible to those that they are most meaningful to, and are well protected and developed in the context of increasing environmental challenges and degradation. (SDGs 2.5, 6.6, 11.4, 13, 14, 15)
- **Support and provide learning opportunities in support of the SDGs:** Empowering people to know about, care about and have practical skills to take part in sustainable development activity, in rights-respecting ways. (SDG 4.7, 4.A, 12.8, 13.3)
- **Enable cultural participation for all:** Ensuring that everyone can access cultural activities, know their own culture and that of others, and contribute to the cultural life of the community. (SDGs 1.4, 4.5, 5.1, 9.1, 10.2, 11.7)
- **Support sustainable tourism:** Tourism can bring benefits to places and communities, but can also cause a range of issues, for example the associated greenhouse gas emissions and where tourism leads to gentrification or large amounts of litter, so tourism activity has to be appropriate and kept in balance with other activities and considerations. (SDG 8.9)
- **Enable research in support of the SDGs:** Collections and cultural heritage practices can support the creation of new knowledge that can contribute to sustainable development, and cultural institutions can empower people to draw on the findings of research. (SDG 9.5)
- **Direct internal leadership, management and operations to support the SDGs:** Cultural institutions can make sure that every decision, every day, is contributing to a better future and not a worse one. They can adopt corporate social responsibility and sustainability reporting. (SDGs 6, 7, 8.8, 9, 12.6, 12.7, 16.6, 16.B)

- **Direct external leadership, collaboration and partnerships towards the SDGs:** Cultural institutions can be a stepping stone between people and communities and larger initiatives, for example international days, years and decades linked to sustainable development. The new Glasgow Work Programme for the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement (2021–31) and the post-2020 framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity are obvious initiatives that the cultural sector can support and factor into its strategies and plans. Other initiatives include the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and Decade for Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–30), to give some environmentally focussed examples. (SDGs 17.16, 17.17)

We are now half-way through the period of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. We need to significantly increase the profile of the Agenda and provide people with opportunities to take part in it. The cultural sector can play a much bigger part than it has been playing, but it needs to learn fast and adopt some new approaches: Greater attention to sustainable development, greater alignment with external initiatives such as the Glasgow Work Programme, more attention to human rights-based approaches, and greater focus on reporting and communicating action in sustainability reporting terms are all areas that could help to strengthen the cultural sector's contribution and position as an actor in sustainable development. Those more familiar with sustainable development as an approach can support the cultural sector to embrace these changes, by partnering with cultural organisations and institutions on events and initiatives. That is both our challenge and our opportunity, to leave no-one, no community, no cultural institution, and no country behind.

Annotations

- [1] Other SDGs include 1.4, 2.5, 4.5, 4.7, 4.A, 5.1, 5.3, 6.6, 6.B, 8.9, 9.1, 10.2, 11.3, 11.5, 11.7, 11.B, 12.8, 12.B, 13.3, 14.2, 14.5, 15.1, 15.5, 15.6, 15.7, 15.9, 16.3, 16.7, 16.10 and 17.17 and more (or, in other words, across the SDGs). For further information see: McGhie, H. (2019): Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals. Curating Tomorrow, <https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/museums-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-2019.pdf> as well as McGhie, H. (2022): Understanding the Sustainable Development Goals: a guide for galleries, libraries, archives and museums. Curating Tomorrow, <https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2022/08/understanding-the-sdgs-curating-tomorrow-2022-2.pdf>
- [2] See <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- [3] See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-development>
- [4] See www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/, and also www.aam-us.org/2021/11/02/what-does-it-mean-to-be-trustworthy/, and www.aam-us.org/2022/03/01/what-does-it-mean-to-trust-a-museum/

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