

A Rights-Based Approach to Culture: Museums as Actors of Social Change

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Governments are obligated under international human rights law to protect and conserve cultural activities, sites and objects. The commitment to ensure that culture is preserved and developed, often illustrated through the World Heritage Sites, makes museums and cultural heritage institutions not only important, but a legal necessity.¹ Furthermore, governments are recommended to emphasise the significance of culture in educational programmes, in order to enhance cultural understanding and combat prejudices.² Culture is thus defined as a crucial variable; a means and even a prerequisite for development. But what are the reasons why cultural heritage institutions are receiving increased attention in an international political and legal context?

Shift towards Human Development

Economic growth was traditionally measured by income per capita. This ascribed culture a purely instrumental role in social development; an expression of traditions and heritage

reserved for the already developed society. For the past few decades, however, there has been a noticeable change towards a human rights-based approach to development, where progress is not monetary but reflected in people's freedom to choose. This view, referred to as human development, is measured by indicators for quality of life such as health, education and gender-based equality.³ In the human development approach, culture is an all-embracing view present in attitudes and relations, in connections between societies, and in definitions of how people relate to each other and their environment. In this sense, all forms of development are ultimately determined by cultural factors. Consequently, the role of the cultural heritage institution has gained fundamental importance on several levels.

Reflecting Dynamics and Diversity

In spite of what the term "sustainable" may suggest, culture as an actor of sustainable de-

1. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, UNESCO, 1972.

2. *Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (1974); recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace.

3. *Human Development Report: Concept and Measurement of Human Development*, New York, UNDP, 1990; putting people back at the center of the development process and emphasizing that the goals of development are choices and freedoms.

velopment is by no means a static phenomenon. Cultures are constantly changing, influencing and being influenced by other cultures, both through voluntary exchange and through conflict, force and oppression. A country's culture is therefore not a fixed reflection of its history, but a continuously evolving result thereof. Museums and cultural heritage institutions carry a great deal of responsibility in terms of mediating this dynamic illustration of the past, avoiding stereotypical and static expressions. In this sense, the museum is one of the primary mediators of history, and consequently of our images of ourselves and others. Similarly, the museum is obligated to reflect the diversity of the multinational society, with its array of languages, religions and ways of life. Approaching diversity as a positive force is essential in human development, as it increases options and provides opportunities for citizens to choose. Therefore, if a society is to reap benefits from its pluralism, the cultural heritage institution is needed to provide neutral ground for all of these different expressions to meet.

Providing Context

Policies to enforce human rights values are crucial, but the cultural heritage institution will take over where governments cannot reach; the museum fosters not only knowledge, but respect. By acting as an educator and moderator, the museum reaches beyond legislation. However, since culture is intimately linked to the individual's sense of identity, there is more at stake than attitudes, and the role of the museum is more complex than providing information to the general public. Culture is a question of power. Cultural domination is often based on the exclusion of subordinate groups, breeding

the distinction between "us" and "them". The museum is responsible for responding to such hegemonic expressions by identifying and recognizing underrepresented groups, including these groups in the historical reflections, and in the illustrations of contemporary movements. Providing hidden groups with a context allows them to access their own social identity and reclaim their political voice.

Fostering Individual Freedom

In the process of identifying hidden social groups, the cultural heritage institution faces a number of challenges. Several of them are related to the fact that the right to culture is a collective right, not individual like other human rights. Cultural freedom is a "right of a group of people to follow or adopt a way of life of their choice."⁴ This constellation, however, implies that the values or traditions of the group may be exercised at the expense of individual freedom, and that accepting group rights may result in denial of the stigmatized individual's rights. These arguments are often used to justify oppressing behaviour and dismissing inequalities as "cultural". Regardless of origin, however, this is a corrupt practice not justified by international human rights law. Properly interpreted, cultural freedom is a guarantee for freedom as a whole, protecting and empowering the rights of every individual. Museums and cultural heritage institutions may work to disseminate a message that reflects the diverse freedoms of the group as a source of empowerment for the individual. Moreover, since pluralism is not only global but a local phenomenon as well, cultural rights of minorities must be considered in all museum work.

4. *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Paris, UNESCO, 1995.



Picasso Museum, Paris (F. Thomas/Hoa-qui/Contacto).

Promoting Equal Access to Knowledge

Globalization creates opportunities everywhere, but not for everyone. As a rapid merge of markets, technologies and information erases national borders and brings us closer together, we become painfully aware of the deep fragmentation in opportunities, and also in values. Ownership is concentrated, limiting access to a homogenous few. Through the Internet and open source software it is theoretically possible for all the world's citizens to access information on equal terms. However, the lack

of human and financial resources limits access to new technologies and consequently also to the collected stock of global knowledge. This is in violation of international human rights.⁵ The cultural heritage institution has unique capacity and credibility to disseminate values such as technology, science and knowledge to a wide, general audience. Unlike educational institutions, the museum can ensure not only equal access, but equal participation. In this sense, the cultural heritage institution is more than a reflection of the past, but a channel to the future, allowing an open forum for communication and interaction.

5. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), article 27.1: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."

Conclusion

Sustainable social development is conceivable only when society provides equal opportunities for empowerment and participation, through solid credible institutions. For this reason, the human rights-based approach widely recognizes historical preservation and cultural heritage institutions as contributing to social progress. However, it is time to redefine the concept *cultural heritage*, moving away from

the monumental sites and artefacts. Providing protection and access to a world heritage site preserves history for future generations, but without providing a context.

The museum is the one social actor capable of reflecting the diversity and dynamism of its own society and ensuring that not only material but intangible cultural memory is sustained, mirroring the knowledge, experience and practices of the human dimension of a society.