

## Culture, Climate Change and Sustainable Development: Briefing

The Committee on culture of the world association of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the platform of cities, organizations and networks that foster the relation between local cultural policies and sustainable development. It uses the Agenda 21 for culture as its founding document. It promotes the exchange of experiences and improves mutual learning. It conveys the messages of cities and local governments on global cultural issues.

This document has been prepared by the Secretariat of the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) with a view to providing information and facilitating discussion on a relevant issue regarding culture and sustainable cities. In this respect, the briefing presents data and resources and invites readers to provide their views and other examples so as to pursue the conversation.



Ice Watch by Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, Place du Panthéon, Paris, 2015. Photo: Martin Argyroglo  
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## BACKGROUND

Climate change has in recent years become a core component of global agendas, with major world summits such as the [annual COP meetings](#) involving heads of state, national and local governments, private actors, civil society organisations and individual citizens. In addition to its evident global dimension, climate change has also entered the agendas at other governance levels, with relevant policy discussions, awareness-raising initiatives and specific measures being implemented at regional, national and local level.

And, as with other aspects of the global agenda, climate change is no longer a sectorial concern, but rather one which requires coordinated, transversal efforts in the environmental, economic, social and cultural spheres. It is understood that both the causes and the consequences of climate change lie in a wide range of areas, including production, distribution and consumption models, the distribution of economic resources, the availability of natural resources, migration, urbanisation, social and cultural values, and individual and collective behavioural patterns.

The Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is no stranger to this discussion. Since the adoption of the [Agenda 21 for culture](#) in 2004, the Committee has favoured a multidimensional, integrated approach to sustainable development, where work towards environmental sustainability and cultural development, as well as economic development and social cohesion, should be closely integrated. By stressing that culture should be seen as [the fourth pillar of sustainable development](#), UCLG has highlighted not only the importance of cultural aspects, but also how these and environmental preservation can reinforce one another.

In this respect, UCLG's Committee on Culture places its approach to climate change in the broader context of the exploration of the links between culture, the environment and sustainable development. The global response to climate change requires a structural, cohesive approach, which should be inspired by cultural values and strengthened through cultural practices, in close coordination with efforts in other areas. The [Culture 21 Actions](#) toolkit, adopted at the UCLG Culture Summit in Bilbao, March 2015, argues that "Culture influences our understanding of the environment and our relationship with it on a deep level... People modify the ecosystems around them through cultural practices, values, and visions of the world" – and, as a result of this, calls for cultural factors, including the knowledge, traditions and practices of all people and communities, to be integrated into environmental sustainability strategies, for other synergies to be explored and cultural actors to be strongly involved.

This understanding of the necessary approaches to climate change emerges from the recognition that sustainable development and climate change cannot be addressed exclusively through technical and technological measures, but rather require an approach that encompasses human beliefs, values and behaviour – since, as noted by [Yasmine Ostendorf](#), "[we] have realised that climate change is – at least in large part – a cultural problem, an effect of our lifestyle and consumer behaviours.... Developing alternative structures to our current system requires a change in the way we live, embracing low tech, human solutions, as well as high tech innovations."

More broadly, several authors have noted that all approaches to sustainable development should have a strong cultural foundation and address values, beliefs and worldviews – from [Jon Hawkes'](#) affirmation that discussions about how to achieve sustainability are "a debate... about values; ... a cultural debate", to the views collected in a [IETM publication](#) on the arts and climate change, wherein Mike van Graan argues that "[in] order for development to be sustainable, it requires its beneficiaries to believe in it, in the intended outcomes and in the strategies to achieve such development" and Sacha Kagan adds that "sustainability is about reinventing worlds; it is a cultural project." In the past few years, several research reports, including the final publication of the [Investigating Cultural Sustainability](#) project, have also explored and described the interaction between cultural aspects and sustainable development.

# PRINCIPLES AND APPROACHES

Within this general context, a set of principles and approaches can be highlighted, that serve to describe the UCLG Committee on Culture's approach to climate change and sustainable development:

**1. Whilst climate change and sustainable development are global challenges, many of the measures required to address them should be implemented at local level.**

The role of local governments, civil society organisations and citizens is key in discussing, debating and implementing effective, sustainable solutions. Some examples of how local communities around the world have integrated cultural responses in their approaches to sustainable development challenges will be presented in the following paragraphs.

**2. Traditional knowledge, including that held by indigenous peoples and other communities and groups, can form the basis of a balanced, sustainable interaction between culture and natural ecosystems.**

As indicated by Culture 21 Actions, “[nature] and culture have evolved alongside one another and form a constantly evolving balance.” Cases such as [Jeju's cultural development](#) strongly inspired in nature and traditional knowledge, as well as the [Ha Long ecomuseum](#) or the [Hamuy Cocha Festival in Puno](#), exemplify this approach. It is also worth noting that [indigenous peoples have been strongly involved in global discussions on climate change](#), stressing that climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies should integrate indigenous peoples' rights and highlighting evidence according to which traditional land ownership have proven to be the most effective ways of protecting fragile ecosystems. They have also underlined that traditional knowledge should not be respected solely for instrumental purposes, but also as a way to recognise and protect indigenous people's 'cultural heritage, innovation technologies, cultural expressions and spirituality'.

**3. Creative projects can provide relevant, innovative responses to the challenges raised by climate change.**

Recent years have increasingly witnessed an involvement of artists and creative communities in projects that address climate change – sometimes as a source of inspiration and creative matter, as in the projects launched under the [ArtCOP21](#) banner in Paris, December 2015; sometimes by reflecting on how organisations in the arts and culture should align with sustainable practices, as in the [Creative IG Tools](#) carbon calculators and other tools developed by pioneering organization [Julie's Bicycle](#), as well as in many other projects, as this [briefing](#) shows.

Whereas artists and cultural professionals can play an important role in advocating for change, the need to go beyond a purely instrumental position and ensure that art remains critical, thought-provoking and complex has been noted by many, including in the report of the [professional workshop](#) conducted in the framework of ArtCOP21.

**4. In addition, many individuals and groups around the world are carrying out informal practices in social and cultural innovation, which seek to foster a new balance between environmental preservation, citizen participation, social inclusion and contemporary creativity.**

Relevant trends in this area include the expansion of new gardening practices and other forms of occupation of public space which aim to restore a balance between human needs, natural resources and urban planning (see e.g. this collection of examples in the [Ruhr region](#), as well as the [School of the Commons](#) project in Dakar, among many others).

Elsewhere, some cities, such as [Bogotá](#), are providing support to citizen initiatives which aim to improve the local environment through cultural activities, bringing together artists, environmental groups and other citizen collectives.

**5. Traditional knowledge, artistic work on climate change and citizens' informal creativity point to the unique, intrinsic features of culture, those which connect cultural aspects and sustainable development.**

These include the value of diversity, as a trait common to nature and culture (as in the UNESCO [Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity](#)'s assertion that "A source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature"); the ability of the arts and culture to connect with the deepest human emotions and strengthen resilience in a context of vulnerability ("... artists have the opportunity – and the power – to change the climate narrative. As a society we need to build the confidence to believe that a different, sustainable way of living is possible", [Hannah Van Den Bergh](#)); and the provision of a space where different forms of knowledge and action connect, including bridging the scientific, political, technical and cultural domains ("There is a gap between empirical knowledge that science gathers and the policy and personal action that is demanded in terms of a response. What the arts can do is create the empathy to bridge that gap, create the personal response...", [Guy Abrahams](#)).

In this context, public and private cultural policies and programmes recognising the importance of heritage, diversity and creativity should be part of strategies addressing climate change and sustainable development. A reflection on values and the participative design of visions of the future, including e.g. educational work, public debates, design-thinking exercises and awareness-raising campaigns, should be part of these processes, which cannot focus on changing behaviour only, but should encompass deeper motivations as well.

**6. Efforts towards effective policy transversality should lie at the basis of local governments' strategies to address climate change and foster sustainable development.**

As suggested by [Culture 21 Actions](#), these measures should operate in several directions, including the integration of cultural factors in local environmental sustainability strategies; the explicit recognition in local cultural policies of the connections between culture and environmental sustainability; and the setting-up of working groups or task forces to link the work of local government departments of culture and the environment. Relevant examples in this field include the [design of local cultural policies in Angers](#), and [Quebec's Agenda 21 for culture](#). The exploration of the links between cultural and environmental agendas should be comprehensive and adapted to the issues which are relevant in each local context, with policies and measures in areas such as public space, local produce, gastronomy and traditional knowledge being integrated whenever necessary.

**7. The notion of transversality and partnership should also extend to collaboration with cultural actors and civil society.**

The broad scope and multi-level nature of change required, the distributed character of specialised knowledge and the need to generate shared understanding, narratives and ways of life makes it necessary for governments to work together with a wide range of actors, including civil society bodies active in the areas of culture and the environment, cultural organisations, citizen initiatives and academic experts, among others.

Among the specific measures that may be adopted in this regard are joint campaigns and public debates fostering cross-sectoral thinking on culture, the environment and sustainable development, support for citizen initiatives exploring these links and capacity-building or funding schemes to foster change in the practices of cultural and environmental organisations. Research conducted by Julie's Bicycle in partnership with [IFACCA](#) and [Arts Council England](#) has provided evidence of how some national and regional authorities are working with cultural organisations to foster change, whereas the [GALA funding guide](#) developed by On The Move maps funds and other initiatives which can support arts and culture projects on environmental sustainability.

## FURTHER REFERENCE

The following set of resources provides further information about these issues:

- UCLG Committee on Culture, Culture 21 Actions (2015): <http://agenda21culture.net/documents/culture-21-actions>
- Dessen, J.; Soini, K.; Fairclough, G.; and Horlings, L. (eds), Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015: <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu/conclusions.pdf>
- Van Den Bergh, H., et al., Art for the Planet's Sake. Arts and Environment. Brussels: IETM, 2015: <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications/fresh-perspectives-4-art-for-the-planets-sake>
- Moore, S.; and Tickell, A., 'The Arts and Environmental Sustainability: an International Overview', D'Art Topics in Arts Policy, n°34. Sydney: Julie's Bicycle and IFACCA, 2014: <http://media.ifacca.org/files/DArt34b.pdf>
- COAL / On The Move, ArtCOP21: Professional Workshop. Report & Resources (2016): <http://on-the-move.org/files/ArtCOP21%20Report%20Resources%20EN1.pdf>

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