



UK Coalition for Cultural Diversity

BACKGROUND: THE UNESCO CONVENTION ON THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS, 2005

UNESCO's 2005 Convention signals international recognition that culture should be the 4th pillar of development, alongside economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental balance. Now celebrating its 15th year, it has been signed by 148 countries and has implications at international, regional, and national level. It provides a unique international instrument to keep open a pluralist space for creative works recognising that local arts - including books, film, music, dance, the performing arts, television and the visual arts – play a central role in building intercultural dialogue, identity, tolerance, and critical understanding in today's societies.

The Convention was adopted by UNESCO's 33rd General Conference in 2005. While other UNESCO treaties deal with culture more generally – heritage, intangible and marine heritage etc. - this one specifically addresses creative and artistic works, particularly those transformed by the digital technologies. It is the only international treaty to recognise that these works have both a cultural and an economic value and that they are important vectors of identity and meaning. It therefore safeguards the sovereignty of states to develop national policy in the interests of sustaining national culture. Significantly, it also makes it a Right & Obligation for all signatories to promote greater cultural cooperation and north-south, south-south exchange in support of the developing world.

The treaty grew out of increasing concern during the 1990s, from creator organisations, ministers of culture and parliamentarians, that diversity of cultural expressions was being threatened by the globalisation of trade and services, not least through the WTO, and the internationalisation of the policy process in fields as diverse as finance, the environment, human rights, health and culture. Today, although the WTO process has stalled, bi-lateral trade agreements between nation states, or between regions continue apace, for instance the current free trade agreement under discussion between Europe and the United States, and post-Brexit, the discussions between the European Union and the UK. In both, cultural assets and freedoms are at stake.

In these situations the Convention offers a normative framework to safeguard national policies in support of local expressions. In the audiovisual sector, for example, this might be through continued support for public service broadcasting, quotas and/or production and distribution subsidies. In some cases it has been cited in in defense of a general “cultural exception” to remove all cultural services from the overarching trade negotiations.

As a legal instrument the Convention has parity with other international treaties and should therefore be taken into consideration by other directives such as those of the World Trade Organisation governing the economy, or the directives of the Kyoto Treaty governing the environment. Its operational guidelines have been put in place by its executive body, an Intergovernmental Committee with 24 representatives, which meets once a year, served by its secretariat at UNESCO's Head Office in Paris. Operational guidelines can be found on UNESCO's site, <http://en.unesco.org/creativity/>

Exceptionally, Article 11 of the Convention calls for affirmative action to involve civil society in its implementation and civil society organizations are formally invited to observe and feedback. In September 2007 grassroots coalitions of creator organisations set up The International Federation of Coalitions, (IFCCD), to advance ratification and the Conventions' aims. The UKCCD is a founder member. The IFCCD feeds back to the Intergovernmental Committee, and acts as a consultative partner with unique expertise in the cultural sectors of civil society, <http://www.ficdc.org/?lang=en>.

In 2017 The Conference of Parties set up a bi-annual People's Forum and a structure for bi-annual reports on civil society activities. Civil society organisations have annual meetings with the Intergovernmental Committee and the right to comment from the floor on Convention business.

The Convention has also been used to strengthen awareness of the role of culture in development agendas, particularly informing current discussions for the post-Millennium Development Goals. Through the International Fund for Cultural Development it awards support for the development of cultural policy through training, mapping and infrastructure projects amongst others.

The Convention became law in the UK in March 2008. Before Brexit, the UK government was also signed up as a member of the European Union. In Europe adherence to the principles of the Convention has influenced the revision of regulation for the digital era and the development of frameworks for trade negotiations. In the UK, the Convention has also been included in the priorities for action by the UK National Commission for UNESCO and it has been supported by The Commonwealth Foundation which has urged all Commonwealth States to ratify.

The UKCCD continues to play the leading role for civil society in this country. Working with a range of partners, it has run a series of cross-sectoral conferences to promote awareness of the Convention, and to mobilize stakeholders to implement its objectives. It also monitors legislative developments and their impact on arts and the cultural sector. Significantly we liaise with our European region partners through the European Coalitions for Cultural Diversity, ECCD, based in Brussels and actively engaging with the European Union and the Council of Europe.

For further information:

<https://en.unesco.org/creativity/publications/investing-creativity>