



Commonwealth  
Foundation

# Culture:



what is development missing?

New research on how to integrate  
culture and development

# ‘Putting Culture First’

Introducing the Commonwealth Foundation’s new report on culture and development

## Why culture matters in development

Governments, development organisations and donors are failing to engage with a crucial component of development by ignoring culture. As 2015, the date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, approaches, we are still far from satisfying the immediate human development needs of citizens across the Commonwealth. But current development indicators don’t always appreciate the importance of cultural expression, and the lack of inclusion of cultural components in development strategies can hamper human development.

There is much that culture can do to drive development further. Creative industries offer a significant potential for economic growth, especially for small states looking to develop and exploit niche markets. When cultural products are valued in trade agreements, cultural diversity can prosper. When culture-based methods such as participatory theatre are adopted by development organisations, messages about governance and messages about HIV and AIDS prevention can be more effective and reach new audiences. And when the rights of people to cultural expression are promoted, they can affirm their identities and strengthen governance.

There are development practitioners who accept that culture is overwhelmingly important and that it is inseparable from everything else that people do. But how is it possible to move from broad assertions like these to something more defined that can be incorporated into policy and development strategies? How do we set about recognising and supporting the valuable connections between culture and development?

## The research

In November 2007, over 1,500 representatives from 600 civil society organisations came together at the Commonwealth People’s Forum, where they called on member governments to take steps to support culture’s role in development, amongst other things. In response, the Commonwealth Foundation’s Culture Programme launched a research project in February 2008 to explore some of the ways in which government and civil society decision-makers think that culture and development are linked.

Over an eight-month period, more than 100 participants from the cultural sector and development sector took part in eight face-to-face consultations around the commonwealth including Barbados, New Zealand, South Africa and Trinidad and Tobago. They were asked what they thought culture and development meant, and how the connections could be supported and their benefits maximised. A further 200 participants gave their opinions in a survey on different aspects of the same question.

This consultative research process informed a major new publication from the Commonwealth Foundation called ‘Putting Culture First’. The report summarises government and civil society perspectives on the key ways in which culture is important for development. As well as making the case that culture is a missing piece in the development jigsaw, ‘Putting Culture First’ identifies seven key areas in which culture can aid development in the Commonwealth.

“If we fail to use creativity as a force for social justice, transformation and the articulation of human need, we may unwittingly find that we are letting down the very people in whose name we work.”

# Seven key connections between culture and development

- 1 Economic growth**

Supporting cultural industries can generate real economic development. National economies can grow when niche markets are found for cultural products, but cultural practitioners in particular can benefit if they are provided with a fair trading system to operate within. These benefits of growth must be shared in new ways and lead to real social change.
- 2 Cultural policy and the diversity of cultural expressions**

Strong and well-designed cultural policy frameworks can help protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions, such as a range of music, films, books and television programmes. Social development and cohesion can benefit from this diversity, as people can be assured of listening not just to other cultures' voices, but also to their own.
- 3 Culture-based methods in development**

Culture is a great tool in development interventions. Street theatre, radio or music can communicate key health or governance messages to new audiences in a more effective manner. Culture is also a resource for people when traditional knowledge handed down through generations, such as natural resource management expertise, complements other development approaches.
- 4 A role for cultural expression in development processes**

Giving people a space for reflection and social critique is an important part of the development process. Participatory development methods can benefit from incorporating a cultural approach, and from recognising that support for cultural expression helps people become owners of the development process.
- 5 Expressing yourself and finding identity**

Not having access to a creative environment and a range of cultural voices can make it harder for people to find and affirm different aspects of their identity. People respect and understand each other better if they appreciate their own cultures, as well as those of others.
- 6 Artists working for change**

Cultural practitioners and producers are invaluable at times of political stress. When crises emerge, or when repressive governments take control, artists often operate within a relatively safe space and can offer a strong civil society voice.
- 7 Culture and human rights**

Human rights matter, partly because they're about people having real power. So giving people the right to express their own culture, to an environment where their creativity flourishes, and to a range of cultural voices are all important ways of making sure that support for culture translates into giving people real choices.

## What can be done

Governments, development agencies, civil society and donors must start to adopt long-term strategies to take account of culture. This means coming up with indicators that measure cultural well-being as a development end in itself. It also means finding new ways of quantifying and measuring the impact that support for cultural expression can have. Above all, these strategies must be backed up with financial commitment and political will.

There is an urgent need to make people more aware of culture's importance in development processes. Governments, development agencies, civil society and donors need to fund further research and support the sharing of experiences across the Commonwealth to understand where culture helps

development. A high-level Commonwealth group on culture and development will deliver a set of principles on incorporating cultural perspectives in development. The group will enhance awareness of culture's importance at the political level.

In framing an inclusive but clearly defined area for future work, the 'Putting Culture First' report seeks to enable this dialogue. As a facilitator of this conversation and as a partner for future opportunities, the Commonwealth Foundation stands ready to help governments, development agencies, civil society, donors and most importantly the people of the Commonwealth make the most of culture in development.

## Find out more

### About the Commonwealth Foundation

We are an intergovernmental organisation, funded by the governments of Commonwealth countries. We are asked by Commonwealth governments to work with not-for-profit organisations, charities, non-governmental organisations, culture practitioners and other parts of civil society in the areas of culture, human development, communities and livelihoods, and governance and democracy.

### Find out more about 'Putting Culture First'



You can download an electronic version of 'Putting Culture First' at [www.commonwealthfoundation.com/pcf](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/pcf)

Alternatively, you can request a free copy by emailing [geninfo@commonwealth.int](mailto:geninfo@commonwealth.int)

A variety of primary research material, including summary reports from seven consultations, two workshops, four case studies and the full results of the Commonwealth Foundation survey, can be downloaded at [www.commonwealthfoundation.com/pcf](http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/pcf)

### About the Culture Programme

Beginning a serious dialogue at the policy level, as 'Putting Culture First' aims to do, is an important step. But actions speak louder than words, and since it was established in 2005 the Commonwealth Foundation's Culture Programme has taken significant steps to support cultural expression and intercultural understanding around the Commonwealth.

We recognise the achievements of cultural producers and bring their works to new audiences through our most famous award scheme, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

We provide opportunities for cultural sharing and skills development through our international arts residency scheme.

We support cultural practitioners, for example in the areas of film and music, to have their work appreciated by others and their concerns aired at a global level.

We've also developed projects to foster greater respect and understanding between different identities in the Commonwealth, particularly in the areas of education, the media and interfaith cooperation.

As our advocacy work to promote the role of culture in development continues and expands, the Culture Programme will continue to offer direct support in innovative ways for those who want to express themselves culturally across the Commonwealth.

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