



Indigenous Peoples' Voices and Shaping Cultural Policies

The Landscape of Cultural Policies and Indigenous Voices

When it comes to discussing world cultures and shaping policies, one group tends to get left out. Indigenous Peoples make up about 5 per cent of the global population – numbering some 370 million – and bring significant cultural diversity to our societies, yet they are largely missing at the table when it comes to setting cultural policies.

All Indigenous peoples have the right to thrive and transmit their cultures and languages to future generations and preserve their human dignity. It isn't enough for allies to speak on behalf of Indigenous Peoples. They must be directly involved.

When we leave Indigenous voices out of cultural policy, we miss the opportunity to support Indigenous ways of life, cultural identities, languages, and the knowledges they contain.

Indigenous languages hold irreplaceable environmental knowledge that conserves biodiversity and protects the Earth.

Indigenous Peoples and Nations need to be actively involved in discussions meant to shape cultural policies.

A place at the table

Mondiacult and other forums linked to UNESCO normative instruments are prime opportunities for UN Member States to set the agenda for cultural policies that will be influential for decades to come, yet Indigenous Peoples lack formal representation in the governing bodies of these conventions.

Given that Indigenous Peoples, communities and Nations conceive the role of artists in society in ways that can differ significantly from how non-Indigenous people and state governments understand it, we need to invite them in and create participatory models to directly impact policy.

Soliciting Indigenous views through separate forums and mechanisms is not enough. These do not allow for the deconstruction of colonial practices. They force Indigenous Peoples to adapt to colonial ways of sharing ideas and making decisions.

It is time to integrate Indigenous views and voices into international forums and the shaping of all recommendations, policies and measures that concern cultural development, and to give Indigenous Peoples the latitude to participate in ways that are true to their own practices and preferred approaches.

“Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own Indigenous decision-making institutions.”

- Article 18, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Four ways to include Indigenous voices in cultural policy

1. Their right to participate in cultural life

The Issue

For many Indigenous Peoples, art and culture are indivisible from languages, identities, cultural knowledges, and traditional and spiritual practices. In other words, art is intrinsic to culture: creative practices are foundational to a culture's existence. This worldview is different from most non-Indigenous views on the role of art and artists in society—and this difference can block access to funding for Indigenous artists who don't conform to the mainstream notion of a professional artist.

Have You Thought About It This Way?

Cultural and artistic policies can revitalize and preserve Indigenous languages. To include the Indigenous understanding of art and artists, policies need to consider communal ownership rights and support cultural sovereignty.

How Can You Help?

Granting agencies can:

- Include Indigenous People in shaping grant programs that respond to their needs.
- Create programs for Indigenous artists that view culture holistically.
- Welcome proposals submitted in Indigenous languages and in formats other than writing.
- Redefine the meaning of “artist” to include non-professional creators and knowledge and language holders.
- Co-creating granting models that respect and support cultural sovereignty.

Cultural organizations can:

- Craft or update policies and measures to guarantee Indigenous peoples' rights to participate in their cultures and express themselves.
- Apply the principles of free, prior and informed consent when sharing cultural and artistic practices.
- Ensure Indigenous Peoples can shape the programmes and policies that concern them. Indigenous Peoples and communities need the latitude to decide how their own cultures are expressed and presented.
- Make information about cultural life in broader society available in Indigenous languages and deliver it using an Indigenous educational framework.

“States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.”

—Article 19, UNDRIP



Inspiring Initiative

The Indigenous Languages and Arts Program in Australia supports the maintenance and preservation of Indigenous cultures through languages and artistic practices.

2. Exploring opportunities and challenges in new digital formats for culture

The Issue

Digital technologies can offer new opportunities to create, produce and share Indigenous cultural expressions while protecting their narrative sovereignty. But there are some pitfalls to be aware of in order to both promote and protect Indigenous cultural expressions and content in the evolving digital environment. Also, Indigenous Peoples are sovereign in the governance of their data and knowledges. They must be able to steward and control data that is created with or about themselves in the digital environment.

Have You Thought About It This Way?

Different measures regarding the discoverability of Indigenous cultural expressions need to be considered. To support the dissemination of Indigenous cultural expressions, policy makers could explore quotas, for example, on radio and television, or on digital platforms in the context of initiatives aimed at promoting their discoverability.

How Can You Help?

States can put measures in place to promote Indigenous content by:

- Guaranteeing space for Indigenous people to develop their own cultural and creative industries in the digital environment at the local, regional, national and international levels.
- Developing and strengthening telecommunications infrastructures to improve access to diverse Indigenous expressions in the digital environment, especially in rural areas.
- Encouraging legislative mechanisms for the fair remuneration of rights holders, including Indigenous artists and cultural professionals.
- Inciting public cultural institutions to provide online access to diverse cultural expressions of and for Indigenous Peoples while ensuring that Indigenous Peoples, communities and Nations have the power to decide who benefits from their content.



Inspiring Initiative

Sapmifilm streams Sámi and other Indigenous films in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Most have English subtitles and can be appreciated by a wider audience.

“Parties shall aim to adopt or update existing policies and measures to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions in the digital environment paying due attention to the special circumstances and needs of (...) various social groups.”

–Guidelines on the Implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in the Digital Environment

3. Making room for Indigenous knowledges and languages to contribute to sustainability

The Issue

Indigenous worldviews already exemplify how culture and sustainability go hand in hand and are intrinsically linked. Considering Indigenous ways of doing when shaping cultural policies can lead to new approaches in advancing sustainable development in all cultural ecosystems.

Have You Thought About It This Way?

Cultural policies need to incorporate Indigenous worldviews and relationships with the land as pathways to mitigating climate change and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

How Can You Help?

Institutions can:

- Recognize that art and culture help Indigenous and non-Indigenous people work together to find creative solutions to global issues.
- Include Indigenous Peoples and worldviews in cultural policies to build intercultural dialogue and understanding.
- Create policies that acknowledge the important connections between linguistic diversity and biodiversity.
- Adopt “two-eyed seeing.” *Etuaptmumk*, “the gift of multiple perspectives,” is a guiding principle introduced by Mi’kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett. This principle recognizes the strengths of Indigenous and other knowledges and that learning to use both eyes can benefit the Earth and humanity.

“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.”

—From Article 31, UNDRIP



Inspiring Initiative

As ancient, current, and future stewards of a living cultural landscape, the Anishinaabeg have gained international recognition for their relationship with the land. Pimachiowin Aki UNESCO World Heritage site is a positive example not only of Indigenous leadership in conserved areas, but of the connection between Indigenous languages, knowledges and stewardship of the land. This recognition has influenced World Heritage policies and procedures.

4. Committing to preserve, revitalize, maintain and respect Indigenous languages and education

The Issue

Education that involves cultural expressions must adopt the values and practices of inclusivity, diversity, equity and respect for the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples. States must commit to supporting and creating educational, training and intercultural exchange programmes in the cultural industries.

Have You Thought About It This Way?

In many countries, non-Indigenous people remain unaware of the rights and cultures of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous-led initiatives to raise awareness need to be introduced at every educational level.

How Can You Help?

- Schools at all levels (elementary through post-secondary) and public institutions must support the maintenance and revitalization of Indigenous languages and the transmission of traditional knowledges in line with Indigenous methodologies.
- States must support the development of Indigenous-led institutions that are autonomous and adequately funded as well as cultural knowledge transmission and programs that lead to careers in the creative economy.
- All forms of media—TV, radio, online sources and social media—can raise awareness of the importance of protecting and promoting cultural expressions and the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

—Article 14, UNDRIP

“Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.”


—Article 15, UNDRIP




Inspiring Initiative

Mokotube is the Maori version of YouTube Kids. Created by Hei Tiki Creatives out of New Zealand, it aims to help New Zealand children become confident te reo Maori speakers by making Maori videos for children up to 5 years old available all in one place.

Relevant Normative Instruments

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- 2015**
Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society
 - 2005**
Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions
 - 2003**
Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
 - 2001**
Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity
 - 1982**
Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies
 - 1980**
Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist
 - 1972**
Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage



Please note that this document does not encompass the opinions, views or perspectives of all Indigenous Peoples, nor is it intended to convey that all Indigenous Peoples share the same viewpoints or opinions. Furthermore, it does not address all of the issues and concerns regarding cultural policies and Indigenous Peoples. This document was created with the intent to spark dialogues, ideas and actions that contribute to positive change.

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