

The untapped potential of culture for peace

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After the fall of the Berlin Wall, of which we celebrate its 30th anniversary this year, it seemed that history was moving inexorably in the direction of democracy and free markets and that we could leave behind the dangers of great conflicts forever.

But today, the world is more complicated, competitive than we ever anticipated. The technological revolution is reshaping the way we live, work, and fight. The global economic and political power is shifting from

West to East, with China replacing America as the driver of global change. Populism and authoritarianism are on the rise; public support for democratic ideals remain strong, but are at risk in a number of countries, as the prospect of cooperation framed by international is faltering.

Advancing the cause of global peace and avoiding conflict in a changing world requires a change of paradigm. It requires us to explore new approaches, and include Culture in peacekeeping and reconciliation.

Culture is what makes us human, it shapes the way we interact and communicate. Culture is the place where our identity is framed and where our fundamental values are rooted.

Not surprisingly, 60% of conflicts are said to have an identity element.

On a positive side, a quarter of Europeans agree that culture contributes the most to creating a feeling of community. When asked to identify one or two areas that can help us face major global challenges, almost one in five Europeans mention cultural diversity and openness to others.

Culture and the creative industries also play a key role in economic and social development, and provide the flexibility needed to drive solutions to environmental urgencies.

Undoubtedly, many of the challenges we are facing today can only be confronted if we adopt sustainable development models that work across borders. Reports show that conflict-prone countries have poverty rates of 20% more than the average. Hence, the need to accelerate sustainable development and include culture as a transversal pillar.

Development is not sustainable if societies are not at peace with themselves and with their neighbours and living in environmental balance with the planet and its resources. In this context, culture emerges as an essential factor for both sustainable development and lasting peace, encompassing diverse value systems, traditions and beliefs.

We should not be naïve though. Isolationist and nationalistic movements often abuse the concepts of culture and identity, using their emotional potential. Indeed, the cultural dimension is often at the heart of peace-building processes by being at once part of the problem and part of the solution. As a source of identity, meaning and belonging, culture can both facilitate social cohesion and justify social exclusion and xenophobia.

Only through education, and cultural intelligence, we can drive positive identity, creativity and thus flexible thinking as an antidote to nationalistic narratives.

A multitude of positive EU programmes for culture and education exist, including Creative Europe, Erasmus and the flagship Horizon Europe. The new EU Agenda for Culture highlights external relations as one of its five dimensions, mirroring the vision of a key role of culture in the arts set out in the 2017 Communication on an 'EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations'. The Council conclusions of April 2019 established the EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a relevant framework for action and they correctly reflect the role of civil society in international cultural relations.

We ceaselessly strive to create a culture of peace, as a way of being, doing and living in society that can be taught, developed, and best of all, improved upon. The culture of peace is peace in action.

Civil society here has a crucial role to play because culture cannot be imposed 'top down' and its strength results from it being part of the fabric of communities and their citizens. We must ensure a clear commitment to the cooperation with local stakeholders and civil society at all levels and on equal footing, aiming at bottom-up and people-to-people approach, local empowerment, participation and co-creation' are crucial if we want to succeed.

Culture has an enormous untapped potential for becoming a unifying and mobilising instrument for Europe and the world, bringing hope, new positive narratives and a possible second Renaissance.

