

# The Future of Culture and Development?

A Provocation for the Swiss Network Meeting on Culture and Development

January 26, 2023

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## January 26, 2043

Today is January 26<sup>th</sup>, the year is 2043. Through decades of tiresome advocacy to recognise the value, the strength and potential of culture, it is now firmly positioned at the heart of policy and very much embedded in developmental work. Society's approach to development has also moved on to become more holistic, human-centred and inclusive. Whilst we have moved on leaps and bounds ideologically, there are still gaps to close concerning our responses to shared global challenges such as climate change and conflict. Nonetheless, using arts and culture to do so no longer seems so far-fetched. In fact, much of what was once considered experimental and conceptual is now embedded in governing structures and strategy.

*I just made it back into the city before nightfall. Yes, our vehicles are solar-powered. Yes, some of them are self-driving. But somehow I am still not keen on trusting that the roads are maintained properly. Potholes are as deep as ever. Anyway, my trip to the new Garden for Community Imaginaries was absolutely worth it. I'm totally blown away by how easily experimentation and traditional knowledge, arts and tech, and our community values in general come together to really dig deep into the most complex of challenges. Who would have thought that the farmer, the extended reality artist, and the biomimicry scientist could grow and secure this hyperlocal food system? I mean, it's bleak out there. Decades of rising temperatures, desertification, and lithium mining have severely messed up that place. But then again, who even is just 'a farmer' anymore? Everyone is an artist. Not just in Beuys' social sculpture kind-of-way but really quite literally. After these years of financial, mental, environmental, and emotional austerity, we seem to have found our way back to the most authentic form of artistry: imagination!*

*Now, tomorrow I'm going to meet with the Forum of Holistic Wellbeing and Regenerative Practice. I am so glad we made away with all these ministerial silos here. Bloody distraction. Our citizen's assembly will explore patterns of individual, collective, and ecosystem healing. Healing from environmental decay, migration traumas, violent resource skirmishes, and heritage destruction. And healing has so many dimensions that we will need to look at: the physical, the mental, the emotional, the cultural, the ecological, the economic, the communal, and so many more. So glad there will be a performing artist guiding our patternsensing and sensemaking exercise. I also hope my fellow citizens will appreciate the learnings from our guests. Because I also invited some partners who have been through similar things. Different places, different contexts – same humanity, same biosystem.*

## January 26, 2033

Today is January 26<sup>th</sup>, the year is 2033. Despite global strategic efforts and the most post-recession funding we have ever seen, the world has just failed to achieve the UN sustainable development goals. Whilst the result did not come as a surprise to all, a quiet rumbling in the background is beginning to have more resonance centre-stage. There is now comprehensive data on the shape and growth of the arts and culture sectors globally and after a challenging period for traditional Western-led academic institutions, new curriculums for education have emerged from Artist-led interventions and pedagogies from the global South. These new approaches centre imagination and curiosity and are becoming more embedded in mainstream education. Thanks in part to new perspectives of young leadership, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the story of a better society without Arts and Culture playing the role of the main character.

*Today I was reminded of those internet memes that we found inspiring in the 2020s: stay curious, stay playful, stay weird. Ha! If those kids I met today knew what we were up to back then, they would have roasted me hard. This new curriculum the government has been implementing for the past few years really hits the spot. Play, imagination, curiosity, and philosophy from all corners of the world. They focus on interdependencies, conduct experiments, and use creativity and storytelling as their methods. There is a whole new criticality and care I see in these youngsters. They don't centre themselves and they stay weird. I guess what we manifested back then is slowly becoming reality, despite the SDG bellyflop.*

*But you know what, maybe the reason we didn't achieve the SDGs is not just because of its inherent political-diplomatic-negotiation BS dominated by rich countries. Maybe it's because we didn't consider culture. I mean it. Using public expenditure as the only indicator of culture might not have been the most insightful move. Kudos to all the initiatives that went out there to design responsive, localised frameworks, collect relevant data, and then make it free and accessible. It helps us to measure but also re-think how arts and culture as a sector with wide-ranging impacts contributes to social transformation and development.*

*Development ... when I hear the term 'development' these days, I immediately think of expanding one's own mind, re-learning the lore of the land, re-wiring our brains constantly to make sense of the new technologies, and appreciating scientific and imaginative discoveries. And most of all, collectively find our place in this world, being part of a mutual living organism that strives to replenish and do better. I think I will sleep better tonight, knowing that my children, and their children, and their children will live more safely on our shared planet and get to use the full extent of their histories, identities, and creativities. They are the ones that get to embrace humanity's role, not as THE species but as ONE caretaker in a complex system full of life and wonder.*

## January 26, 2023

Today is January 26<sup>th</sup>, the year is 2023. Very much a symptom of post covid communication, hybrid working is still a popular option and is often leveraged to convene diverse groups together virtually and in person. It's in these convenings that we are reminded of just how common the challenges we face are despite our different contexts. In some spaces within the developmental field, culture is still seen as more of a promotional tool or vector through which to deliver development initiatives only. In most places there is still some level of difficulty in really defining what culture is and its inherent value, especially to those who feel they sit outside of it as a sector. There are also still disparities between who gets to develop their artistic expressions and cultural identities free from the 'duty' of only doing so in response to localised social challenges. Amongst certain shining national examples and others not doing so well, there certainly does seem to be an appetite to collaborate and create a more inclusive and sustainable ecosystem to work both in and with culture.

*Funny that. Switzerland of all places really seems to have their shit together. I went to a network meeting today with a bunch of representatives from development agencies, arts organisations, and the government, but also artists and other folks that are really keen to put more intention into their work with arts and culture in international cooperation. Weird how I still believe that concerted policy action is still the way to go, despite its glacial pace. And I'm not even talking about the political ice cream flavour of the day. The idealist I am. It's about time we recognise that using artists as cheerleaders of WASH campaigns or making arts organisations implement democracy campaigns alone doesn't get us very far. There is SO MUCH MORE. Really, I'm very hopeful that with the energy and vision in this room today, we can really start to shift the conversation, push the envelope a little, burn down the ... well, let's keep that for another day.*

*But, oh boy, change is so needed. Some 150 Ministers of Culture and UNESCO now declared culture a 'global public good', which is promising. Do we need a standalone culture goal for sustainable development, though? Think about it, climate change is increasingly biting us in the butt, and we are fast asleep at the wheel leading conceptual debates of whether culture means identity, a way of life, heritage, creativity, or just the arts. The heck, even the World Bank says that working with the culture sector is difficult because WE cannot even articulate what culture means, why we are even relevant. On the other hand, it's the World Bank, who am I kidding?!*

*I think ultimately it comes down to understanding – for yourself – what culture means, what potential and power you see in arts and culture, what it does to you. And then you need to understand what it means to other people, what their life is like, what they dream of.*