



Knowledge for sustainability

Irina Bokova

For Irina Bokova, the “boundless potential of human ingenuity” is the best resource to tackle emerging global challenges and tipping points for the planet. Education, science and culture are drivers and enablers of sustainable development and should, she says, be integrated firmly into the post-2015 agenda.

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Women from the Miao ethnic minority in Guizhou province, China, learning how to film living heritage as part of a cultural mapping project, MDG-F Joint Programme on Culture and Development

What makes *sustainable development* sustainable? What are the key factors that enable and drive sustainability? These questions are leading the global conversation on a new development agenda to build the future we want for all.

In order to answer them, we must build on the unprecedented progress that countries have made since 2000 in taking forward the Millennium Development Goals. The *United Nations Millennium Declaration* embodied a great, humanist ambition to promote human rights and dignity as the basis for more inclusive and equitable development. This was also the historic expression of political will to set not just a declaration of rights but a framework of targets and deadlines to translate them into reality. This experience is the backbone for building a new transformative agenda to follow 2015.

There has been great progress since 2000, including in some of the world's poorest countries, but advances have been uneven – and enduring inequalities may come to undermine the sustainability of positive results. Countries must consolidate and accelerate progress at a time of rising uncertainty, when expectations are heightening in many societies for greater equality, social justice and inclusion.

How can we do better?

First, as we have learnt, there is no “one-size-fits-all” development model. It is not enough to set global targets – we need to reflect more on how we can achieve them in relation to each context. Too many well-intended development efforts have fallen short, because they did not take into account and build on local cultural settings.

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More fundamentally, development has not focused enough on people – on providing individuals with the capacities to realise fully their rights and aspirations. This point has been highlighted in the recent report of the *High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, as well as the 2012 report, *Realizing the Future We Want for All*.

To put people first, education, culture, and the sciences must be integrated firmly on the post-2015 agenda. Sustainability has deeper roots than financial and economic assets. Sustainability is about skills and information; it is also about respecting cultural diversity, equal opportunity and learning to live together. This must encompass also the importance of universal access to information and knowledge, freedom of expression and media development.

I see this as a key outcome of *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development* – genuine sustainable development calls for more than green investment and low carbon technologies. It calls for a better education for more relevant skills, sharper scientific and technological innovation in the area of sustainability and a stronger focus on culture and cultural diversity. These are drivers and enablers of sustainability – they provide women and men with tools to cooperate in resolving complex and connected challenges and to adapt to a changing and pressured environment. These are catalysts for the greatest of all renewable energies, which is human ingenuity.

Rio+20 called also for a greater balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Education, culture and the sciences are ways to integrate this agenda and to make it work.

Education provides skills and knowledge for the world of work, but, fundamentally, it is also a force for empowering individuals and enhancing their inherent dignity. This power lends sustainability to all development efforts.

Culture is a dynamic economic sector, representing trade opportunities and revenues, but it is also a force for social cohesion and inclusion. Cultural goods have both an economic and a cultural value, and this integrative power is its greatest strength. As the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins has argued, “the cultural space is wider than any economic space.” UNESCO’s 2005 *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* highlights the dual nature of cultural goods and services, and this is why the Convention is an increasing reference, including in international trade.

The same goes for the sciences – we need a stronger integration between social and human sciences and the natural sciences. This holds the key for scientific progress that is accessible to all, equitable and, therefore, sustainable. The integration of social and natural sciences is important for policy making, in order to widen the balance of options and ensure well-rounded decisions. Cooperation in this ways can help bridge the gaps that have emerged among the economic, social and environmental aspects of development.

To move forward, we must identify drivers and enablers of sustainable development – we must also craft the right approach to harness their power.

Education is a case in point. Since 2000, the number of out-of-school children has been reduced from 108 to 57 million in primary school, with significant improvement in gender equality. However, the focus on access has tended to leave aside the quality of learning. Today, 250 million children of primary school age still cannot read or write. Far too many young people lack the basic skills for a world of work, and this is a time bomb for global unemployment and civil unrest.

This is the meaning of the recent results of the *UN World Global Survey* (with over 500,000 participants in 190 countries), where the call for “good education” emerged as top priority. We need a revolution for skills, to provide young people with the tools they need to lead decent lives, to get decent jobs, and to tackle the challenges of climate change. Education should also focus on promoting social inclusion and teaching practical skills. In the post-2015 global agenda, this calls for a holistic education goal, with a focus on quality and equity of lifelong learning. This must acknowledge education’s role as an enabler for all development goals – in a world getting younger every day, education clearly holds the keys to the future.

The same is true for culture. Culture was not recognized as a factor in drafting the Millennium Development Goals. One reason may have been a lack of indicators and evidence on the contribution of culture for development. This has changed. Over the past decade, the power of culture has become recognized both at the global and national level. In 2006, culture was mentioned in less than 30 per cent of UN Development Assistance Frameworks – this stands now at above 70 per cent.¹

Between 2006–2008, UNESCO joined forces with UNDP and other agencies to lead eighteen Culture and Development Joint Programmes of the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F), financed by Spain. The results show that culture is a key enabler of sustainability and contributes to development through social inclusion and poverty reduction.² Thousands of jobs have been created or sustained – from Costa Rica to Senegal, from Cambodia to Egypt – in the cultural sector, including tourism, creative industries, music, the cinema, and crafts, where UNCTAD plays a leading role. These Joint Programmes have confirmed the importance of the cultural dimension for local ownership and inclusive participation – essential factors for the sustainability of development.

Building on its six international Culture Conventions, UNESCO is determined to secure recognition of culture as an enabling factor in the post-2015 agenda. Two UN General Assembly Resolutions on Culture and Development have already been adopted, in 2010 and 2011. The Hangzhou International Congress on “Culture: Key to Sustainable Development” was held in May 2013, followed by the *High Level UN General Assembly Thematic Debate on Culture and Development* in June, and a session on education and culture of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals – all testifying to a global shift in perceptions of culture.

All these are signs of a deeper recognition of the need to make far more of the potential of innovation and knowledge for sustainability. Across the world, innovative solutions and new ideas are emerging. The boundless potential of human ingenuity is our best resource to tackle emerging global challenges and tipping points for the planet. We must support cultural diversity, the sciences, freedom of expression to foster innovation, critical thinking, through intense exchanges, supported by new tools of communication and information and new media. We can build a stronger global innovation ecosystem to inform more effective policies for the common good. The Rio+20 Outcome Document underlined here the need for a stronger science-policy interface, and to enhance national scientific and technological capacities, especially in developing countries. UNESCO is working at all of these levels, to harness the full power of the



Argentina - vocational training: Student honing her skills at the new school of the Fundacion Teatro Argentino de la Plata sponsored by UNESCO's International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD). Established by the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity, the IFCD provides support to initiatives designed to boost the creative capacities in developing countries. Since 2010, the Fund has invested in 61 projects in 40 countries

sciences for all. This includes the creation of a Scientific Advisory Board to support the UN Secretary-General and strengthen the links between science, policy and society.

We live today in a new age of limits -- in terms of resources and the boundaries of our planet. This means we must make far more of the boundless energy of human ingenuity and knowledge. We must release the full power of innovation and creativity, to craft new solutions that are inclusive, just and sustainable. No single country can hope to tackle these challenges alone. Climate change, the loss of biodiversity and pollution have little respect for national borders. This is especially true for the challenge of sustainably managing the ocean, highlighting the need for networks of observation and knowledge management. Sustainability cannot be a matter for Governments alone, but a concern for all parts of society, including universities and the private sector. This calls for stronger and more effective multilateralism, along with new partnerships to unleash the full potential of education, culture, and the sciences as drivers for human dignity and human rights, and breakthrough enablers of sustainable development ◀

End Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive analysis of the inclusion of culture in the UNDAF, see <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002200/220060e.pdf>
- 2 For an overview of the results of the MDG-Fund projects, see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/achievingthe-millennium-development-goals-mdg-f-culture-and-development/>

About the author

Irina Bokova has been the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization since 15 November 2009. Before being elected as the first woman to head the Organization, she served as Bulgaria's Secretary of State for European Integration, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to France and Monaco, and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, among other distinguished positions, and contributed to the drafting of Bulgaria's new Constitution in 1991. As founder of the European Policy Forum, Ms Bokova has always worked to overcome divisions and promote dialogue, diversity and human rights. She has been actively engaged in international efforts to advance education for all, gender equality, human rights and cultural dialogue.