

Cooperation in a fragmented world

International cultural relations at the crossroads of climate, health and political crisis

Nikita Dhawan: *“A common vulnerability in the face of risk brings us together. But as we all know we might be facing the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. And that makes all the difference.”*

Walter Mignolo: *“We are not longer in an epoch of changes [...]. We are inhabiting, living dually in a change of epoch. [...] And in a change of epoch we have to question everything that we have been taken for granted, like cultural international relations, like cooperations.”*

This report developed by members of the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance (ICRRA) is based on the discussions that took place at the second ICRRA conference in October 2021. It examines current challenges and opportunities posed by the crosscutting crisis affecting climate, health and politics faced by international cultural relations practitioners and policy-makers. It presents recommendations to these stakeholders, and outlines areas of future research. A particular focus is on how to continue using international cultural relations to support societies in valuing and upholding fairness, equity and democracy, as key values orienting the tackling of both global and local problems and finding co-created and collaborative solutions.

Context

There is widespread acknowledgement that the end of the fossil fuel era is on the horizon. Climate change is already affecting lives. The implications of this are not limited to technological and socioeconomic developments. This is also a question of culture. This transition impacts the lived experiences, values, identities, social relations and interactions that shape our everyday lives. Therefore, the interdependencies of cultural and industrial models and old and new colonial power structures need to be investigated.

Climate change also brings into focus other fault lines in the global system. The main contributors to historic greenhouse gas emissions are not those states most affected by its consequences now; this is a crisis that disproportionately affects the global south. And it does so in the context of a health crisis that is making its own extreme demands on the global economy, calling for resources that are not available, at least not outside the world's very largest economies.

This comes only thirteen years after the financial crisis of 2008. At that time, as one of the conference keynote speakers, the founder and chairperson of the School of Politics, Policy and Governance (SPPG) in Nigeria, Oby Ezekwezili, stated, “we missed a big opportunity to scrutinize the global cooperation and collaboration systems”. A repeat of the “rebuilding” of the global economy that followed the 2008 crisis, which it has been argued merely replicated previously existing power structures and unsustainable modes of production with its focus on GDP and high carbon industries, will surely not be tenable. And whilst the duration of the Great Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic may be limited, the climate crisis has an open time horizon and many of us are only just beginning to realize its implications.

True, the urgency of the climate crisis and the other global challenges with which it intersects is now widely acknowledged. But this calls for a united response and global cooperation at a time of increased geopolitical rivalry and with economic, technological and demographic shifts fueling the emergence of a new and as yet uncertain, multipolar world order increasingly shaped by digital technologies. This offers potential to connect communities across borders and empower creativity and innovation; it also generates new opportunities for polarization and misinformation.

This also exposes and ignites debates and challenges around decoloniality, inspired by new global movements for social justice. Global power imbalances and the legacies of colonialism and empire need to be properly acknowledged and addressed if global crises are to be tackled in a fair and inclusive – and therefore effective – way. Only then can the “5-alarm global fire” that the UN Secretary General sees in the COVID-19 pandemic, global finance, climate change, lawlessness in cyber space, and threats to peace and security be fought with the full mobilization of all countries¹. (Remarks to the General Assembly about priorities 2022 on January 21st).

¹ Text: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/261520>; Video: <https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/2703/2703133/>.

It becomes more and more evident, that an integrative international approach is needed that addresses the interdependencies of culture, climate, health, equity and – last but not least – security.

The UN's 2030 Agenda for sustainable development can be regarded as one political framework in this direction. But there are only 9 years left to achieve these goals. As Gijs de Vries, expert in ifa's Research Programme "Culture and Foreign Policy", former member of the Dutch government and the European parliament, argues, culture is strongly affected by this, especially regarding quality education (Goal 4), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities (Goal 11), fighting climate change and impacts (Goal 13), and the promotion of just, peaceful and inclusive societies (Goal 16). And, as de Vries also notes and other cultural relations research attests, culture also helps to foster and achieve the agenda's goals.²

Developing solutions for complex problems: The role of cultural relations

The 2021 ICRRA conference examined the intersections and interdependence of these crises from a cultural relations perspective.

The three keynote speakers and 21 speakers of different regional backgrounds provided input on related questions from different fields of work: academic research as well as independent consultancy and cultural practice.

As these discussions ask for changes on multiple levels, they have direct relevance for the realm of foreign policy, in which cultural relations can play a significant role, as well as implications for cultural actors. Indeed, the conference helped to highlight the **vital social importance of the cultural relations sector** (including education, language, civil society) in the following fields in particular:

Human security

- **Culture provides a sense of social resonance**, purpose, articulation, acknowledgement. As Anmol Vellani, theatre practitioner, India, said: "Cultural expression is a common Human desire, not a need." International cultural relations should foster rights for cultural expression and artistic freedom in solidarity and avoid paternalistic beneficiary attitudes. This way societies' resilience is helped.

Imagining new futures

- in **asking difficult questions**, pointing to unsolved challenges and ambiguities, imagining more inclusive futures

² <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/69719>; <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/our-stories/the-missing-pillar-sdgs>.

- in **the importance of art and culture (and education) in enabling people** to imagine new futures and in bringing new vision and immediacy to discussions about climate change, and other urgent global challenges, appreciating new and diverse perspectives

Decoloniality

- in acknowledging and **confronting the colonial roots of global fragmentation**, and also in approaching the problems in the very mechanisms of multilateral cooperation
- in a **decolonization of mindset**, for example: In 50 years' time the majority of the working population of the world will live in Africa. The African continent is on the move – it is up to “the rest” to think about whether they would like to join.

Trust and dialogue

- in its ability to **maintain channels of dialogue** in times when other channels of international interaction are challenged: and also to provide an infrastructure for discussion and learning in a tense geopolitical environment in multiple ways
- and in so doing promote trust and understanding as conditions for cooperation: as Ezekwesili urged, a more inclusive multilateral system is needed – enhanced trust and understanding will be critical in building a **new “citizen-centric multilateral global order”**
- **reciprocity in relationships** is a big question; it cannot always be requested or made prerequisite, yet it should remain a horizon of aspiration

Access and inclusion

- to promote the **access and inclusion** of different groups within civil society, including groups that are otherwise excluded from knowledge production: both in order to combat the fragmentation in the global world order and to give voice and influence to new ways of knowing and thinking
- culture can foster imagination and sustainable social relations and support effective decision-making in **responsible use of digital technologies**; platforms need to provide better access and allow more benefit from cultural productions for the artist

Reflections from the conference

QUOTE Ezekwesili: “I think that the greatest tragedy of our current multilateral system is the sense of complacency that year after year follows without there being concrete results from various global meetings and yet political leaders are comfortable. We need to have citizens who no longer make it comfortable for global leaders to not deliver results out of global gatherings.”³

QUOTE Walter D. Mignolo, William H. Wannamaker Professor and Director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University, USA: “That legacy of the constitution of racism and the classification of modernity is today in the unconscious of everybody. So the question of language is the question of the frame of knowledge and the classification of people or races are imbedded in whatever international and interstate relation we are engaging in today. And more important for me is what we like to do in this as international cultural relations in the future.”⁴

QUOTE Nikita Dhawan, Professor of Political Theory and History of Ideas at TU Dresden, Germany: “There is a certain element of elitism in transnational civil society. [...] Most actors in the transnational sphere are actors who already have access to the enabling mechanisms of the state. [...] Also the institutionalized civil society actors have already access to global capital. And this cannot be said about subaltern groups.”⁵

QUOTE Naren Chitty, Professor and Inaugural Director of the Soft Power Analysis & Resource Centre at Macquarie University, Australia: “I believe that it’s useful for international intercultural communicators to recognise and relish their own hybridity. This will help in advancing on a path towards trust and resharing or respecting of values in intercultural, international dialogue. The denial of something, of the ‘other’ in oneself, is turning a blind eye to a basis for intercultural understanding and trust.”

QUOTE Stuart McDonald, Director of ICR Research, UK: “In this kind of environment where there is a strategic reordering underway, the risk of miscalculation or miscommunication is far greater than its ever been before so cultural relations actually allows us some opportunity to avoid that.”

QUOTE Avril Joffe, head of the Cultural Policy and Management Department at the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa: “What will it take to actually get primary research happening by African scholars for African people? [...] [For example, what me and my] colleagues are looking at is to start a journal on creative economy for Africa.”

QUOTE Ojoma Ochai, Director of Arts for the British Council in Western Africa: “Local higher education needs to do more and institutions need to support this sustainable model more”. But the audience can be a barrier, “because even when we say ‘let’s write and publish

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0eJWZauz8g>.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJkZ4gje6s>.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIHligQJNl4>.

in a local language’, we want that local language to be understood. And I feel that’s where technologies can play a role.”

QUOTE Doreen Nchang, postdoctoral researcher at University of the Western Cape, South Africa: “[When we talk about decolonisation,] we also need to look at knowledge production and dissemination. And also decolonizing the structure in which this publishing is happening. Because when we talk about these structures we’re looking at the editors, the reviewers and the authors.”

QUOTE Pedro Affonso Ivo Franco, musician and independent consultant working across the cultural, creativity and development sectors: “How to empower local project managers to conceive projects themselves using methodological tools, local methodologies, talking first with potential beneficiaries of that programmes and projects to understand what they really want, what is really needed and out of that develop something locally.”

QUOTE Avril Joffe: “There are many words and values that unpack unfairness or fairness in cultural relations [that are] equally difficult to understand. And we need to provide room for conversation, so that we can really, truly develop a common understanding inside contexts, inside the very context of running projects, doing programming, thinking about the work that one does in a particular country – rather than prescribe what they may be. We need to surface the underlying values related to the idea of fairness.”

QUOTE Anmol Vellani, theatre practitioner, India: “Understanding your location first, asking what’s bothering you, should be the starting point for intercultural practice. I would say: One needs to ask what *should* be bothering you because it is not often the case that collaborating artists are bothered by what should be bothering them. By recognising that they are part of the problem and by asking questions about their location and about what should be bothering them, collaborating artists would in effect be clearing the ground for putting their own privileges and preconceptions, their own assumptions of right and wrong, their complicity in the dominant epistemology under the scanner and for making all this the subject of collaborating work.”

Recommendations

Research

Continue researching and critically examining conceptual frameworks, policy and practice. But don't forget to also examine research itself: What are the biases and assumptions? What is driving the researcher and the research questions? What methods and sources are used and are they reliable and valid? Who is paying for the research and why? Transparency, accountability and ethics are of utmost importance.

How can diplomacy improve in this way – or is it impossible by this theoretical concept itself? Is it contaminated by state power structures? Continue research on Cultural relations relation to the environment; and evidence for culture in SDGs besides economic growth.

Commission more research to Global South researchers; reflect about hierarchizing local research. But also be wary of labelling that hides the complexity of individuals, groups and situations.

Practice

More time and funding for incubator phases is needed. Fairness also BEFORE the actual collaboration phase; improvement in inclusion will only be reached, when global North practitioners deeply deconstruct their presumptions at the beginning, going through thorough reflection: why am I doing this here, what will happen if we are not getting it right?

Question of benefit, impact factors, indicators need to be improved: make deep listening for example an indicator for equality in cooperation; also ownership of curriculum development

Cultural relations need to be seen less as a transactional relationship and more as a goal in itself, with more space for all sides to listen to each other and to be aware of the potential to be shaped oneself by the relationship Cultural relations must not be used as cleansing hands or “green washing”; intersectional policy approaches need to expand, intersectoral consistency is a matter of credibility

Emphasize the importance of choosing working languages specific to contexts; raise awareness of cultural institutes from the Global North of practice of language dominance; use new ways of knowledge mobilization outside traditional academic education. ask: In whose interest are we working? This is a key question: more openness and frankness about positionality of actors is needed

Policy Advocacy

ICR (International Cultural Relations) as a concept still needs further discussion and visibility; it is different to a promotion and representation framework of Cultural Diplomacy; it must enlarge the scope for more integrated programmes, like for example culture and security. However, regardless of what you call it, consider what you do and what values inform it.



Cultural discourse needs to keep its distance from development discourse – and these discourses need to be critically examined and the values they encapsulate carefully considered. As access to culture and cultural expression are, as Vellani stressed, a desire more than a need, the desire needs to be acknowledged, more than in developmental ideological mind sets being nurtured. According to him, first of all frankness about one's own positionality is key: "Why should I be bothered by this?"

Long term: invest in artists and other cultural professionals (such as arts managers and creative producers) as they can influence their communities with their intercultural experiences.

Consider policy cycles and necessary time for implementation and feedback - break with short-term thinking/action. Think beyond the next election.

Conference recordings

Keynote presentations and other highlights of the Conference:

<https://www.ifa.de/en/research/icrra/#section9>

Further Reading

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Imprint

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