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**Cultural Rights and the Governance of Development**

Dear Prof. Xanthaki, I am responding to your call for submissions on cultural rights and the governance of development. I am a self-employed museum consultant, working with sustainable development agendas, including human rights and using rights-based approaches. As an opening remark, cultural rights and empowerment are closely linked using the definition of empowerment as “The process by which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives. It is the process by which they increase their assets and attributes and build capacities to gain access, partners, networks and/or a voice, in order to gain control.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Main questions**

**1. How are human rights generally integrated in your policies and programmes?**

1.1 Curating Tomorrow is a consultancy supporting museums and their partners to contribute more effectively towards sustainable development agendas, including human rights. Human rights and human rights-based approaches are a foundation for this work, and are used to diagnose what types of interventions museums and their partners can undertake, to respect, protect and fulfil rights. The guide ‘Museums and the SDGs’ identifies seven main opportunities for museums, several of which are closely related to cultural rights, namely: protecting cultural and natural heritage; supporting education for sustainable development; promoting cultural participation for all (in sustainable development, not ‘just’ in museums); supporting research; management approaches; and partnerships for sustainable development.

**2. Please provide examples of any programmes that contribute to the respect, protection and implementation of cultural rights**

2.1 The project Reimagining Museums for Climate Action (2021) aimed to shift the narrative of climate action away from one where decision makers and organisations provide society with the ‘answers’. A competition was launched asking people everywhere to ‘reimagine the museum as an institution, to support them to take the climate action they want to take’. From 264 submissions in 48 countries, 8 were developed as exhibits at the time of COP26 in Glasgow. A website of 80 of the ideas aims to provide a resource for the museum sector. The project aimed to support the ‘participation’ aspect of Action for Climate Empowerment (part of the Paris Agreement).[[2]](#footnote-2)

2.3 The Whitaker Museum, in Rossendale (Lancashire, UK) underwent a major redevelopment, completed in 2021. I was the interpretation consultant for this, and also worked on the Museum’s strategy and vision. This is articulated on the Museum’s website that: “We are working to strengthen people’s rights and entitlements in terms of cultural access, education and participation in the life of the community... We draw on history and heritage, to help imagine, design and begin to create the Valley we want for people and nature.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

2.4 I have been advising Museums Galleries Scotland on human rights and human rights-based approaches to inform the development and delivery of the projects ‘Empire, Slavery and Scotland’s Museums’ and ‘Delivering Change’.

2.5 I am regularly invited to speak at conferences and in workshops, and emphasise people’s environmental rights, such as in the Aarhus Convention (on access to information and participation in decision making and justice), and human rights generally (including the Right to Development).

2.6 The series of guides I write on sustainable development topics typically identify the relevant human rights and SDGs. I promote and am active in Action for Climate Empowerment and the new programme for the Convention on Biological Diversity.

2.7 I emphasise that sustainable development is not, or should not be, a top-down agenda, but a collaborative dialogue with top-down, bottom-up (especially) and transverse dimensions, and also that the SDGs, and human rights, are a universe of connected aspirations, challenges and rights, not a set of separate boxes.

2.8 The Addis Ababa Principles on the Sustainable Use of Biodiversity cover governance, management, education and participation, and are referred to in the IPBES Sustainable Use of Wild Species Assessment many times (especially in p.103-111).[[4]](#footnote-4)

**3. Please provide recent examples of programmes, policies and commitments:**

3.1 In 2020 I published an open-access guide on ‘Museums and Human Rights: human rights as a basis of public service’, with sections on cultural rights and rights-based approaches, to encourage museums to take up human rights as a basis for transparent, effective and transformative decision-making and services, to shift away from elitist and/or top-down/self-defined and/or purely instrumentalist approaches to decision-making and service provision. This guide has been downloaded nearly 6,000 times and is part of a series on sustainable development topics that circulates widely.[[5]](#footnote-5)

3.2 As a result of several years of activity, Latvia’s VNR for the SDGs (2022) identified culture, namely museums and libraries, as a ‘transformative factor’ to help accelerate activity for the SDGs: “Latvian cultural space has proven to be a safe and inclusive environment for people to discuss and solve challenges of Latvian and global significance. Libraries and museums stand out as drivers of sustainability that, over the last three years, have helped people understand not only sustainable development goals and information in general, but also each other.” Activities included training courses on the SDGs for museum and library professionals, conferences and workshops on ‘localising the SDGs’ and DRR through museums and libraries,[[6]](#footnote-6) a database of good practices,[[7]](#footnote-7) and Latvian-language versions of publications on SDGs and museums, a professional network and webinars.[[8]](#footnote-8)
Latvia’s official side-event for the 2022 HLPF was on “Libraries and museums as safe spaces for dialogue and information literacy” and has 31,000 views on Youtube.[[9]](#footnote-9)

3.3 The Whitaker redevelopment described above includes exhibitions that ask people ‘what kind of place do we want to live in?’ and ‘what kind of world do we want to live in?’, information on the 30 UDHR articles, and another exhibition space that invites people to ask questions, of the museum and for wider society.

3.4 I have recently completed a Churchill Fellowship, exploring how sustainable development challenges are brought to life, including participation in Stockholm+50 and the UNFCCC conference in Bonn in 2022, and a month-long visit to Japan to explore museums in relation to disasters and Disaster Risk Reduction. Japanese experiences prioritise the importance of all three of ‘self-help, mutual aid, and public support’ and museums play many practical roles in Disaster Risk Reduction that could be made use of elsewhere, including approaches that memorialise past events, and that aim to learn their lessons and provide people with practical skills, to reduce disaster risk now and in the future. Such an approach is far-removed from considering ‘culture’ as a time-bound recreational activity (such as a visit to a museum), or through a primarily economic/tourism lens. The report from this Fellowship will be available by late summer.[[10]](#footnote-10)

3.5 I wrote a blog post for the Churchill Fellowship blog on human rights and rights-based approaches, encouraging people and organisations to take part in UDHR75, and to ‘build a culture of peace in harmony with nature, one museum at a time’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

3.6 I write a series of articles for the community magazine for the village I am from, ‘Muir Matters’, to empower people to understand their rights, sustainable development, and to help make sustainable development a local activity.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**4. Please provide information on any monitoring or evaluation mechanisms assessing the impacts of your development programmes or policies on cultural rights.**

4.1 The open-access guide ‘Mainstreaming the SDGs’ aims to help museums to set goals, make plans and monitor activity, using the SDG targets.[[13]](#footnote-13)

4.2 The project Our Collections Matter (ICCROM) developed a set of indicators for each of the SDG targets to relate them to the work of collections-based cultural institutions, many of which relate to cultural rights.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**C. Additional questions for international, national and local civil society actors, including those involved in development programmes**

1. Curating Tomorrow has a general commitment to human rights, and participates in the UN Global Compact and reports annually on progress. I have worked for over 30 years in environmental agendas and in and with museums. I took up sustainable development, the SDGs and human rights as a normative framework and set of practical tools, as a basis for activity.
2. I work internationally with museum organisations, and with different types of museums. I encourage them to understand the normative aspect of rights (eg. in terms of countries’ Constitutions and obligations), and to promote rights-based activity as a way to transform institutions to be more effective in society. This approach requires museums to consider who they are ‘leaving behind’ and how and why, and to use the goals of both environmental and human rights agreements, and the SDGs, to inform decision making.
3. The museum sector makes little use of or reference to human rights or rights-based approaches. ‘Culture’ is often understood in a narrow sense as meaning ‘high culture’ (a typically elitist or middle-class activity requiring a high degree of education), or in an instrumental sense with little transparency on how or why particular priorities have emerged. ‘The right to cultural life’ is too easily subsumed to be understood, incorrectly, as ‘the right to visit museums, galleries and other cultural venues’. This is not aligned with either cultural rights or a rights-based approach. ‘Culture’ as often considered in museums as separate from ‘science’, so the right to science and scientific information, and to benefit from scientific advancement are poorly served.

The commercialisation or semi-commercialisation of the museum sector, with a project-based funding model, and/or being increasingly encouraged to find alternative funding sources (typically from business), does not support either a cultural rights approach, or the protection of human rights from corporate interests/priorities.

Under-funding of museums is a major challenge, with many museums having lost staff, or becoming increasingly instrumentalised (or instrumentalising themselves to secure funding), or subject to increased interference from authorities.

Top-down approaches, that put museums (or similar institutions) as the ‘answer’ to society’s or people’s problems fail to acknowledge that people are neither passive nor victims waiting to be ‘fixed’ by these organisations, but that it is the organisations that need to change. This would require a radical rethink from most organisations and from funders. Similarly, approaches that simply instrumentalise museums, libraries or cultural institutions to deliver local or national authorities’ SDG commitments (or the sectors’ or organisations’ own goals) undermine the principles of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

Sustainability and sustainable development are often considered as meaning ‘environmental sustainability’ or reduced to ‘climate change’, rather than in a holistic way. This is problematic as great social challenges, including poverty, hunger and global inequality, fail to be addressed. ‘Sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ become reduced to considering how to use natural resources carefully, an approach that omits people and their rights.

In terms of the governance of sustainable development, activity is still mainly using traditional top-down or policy-led approaches, that do not necessarily create space for people to share their views or concerns, or to determine the futures that they want. This is highly problematic as it will not enable transformative systemic change if people are only given opportunities to contribute or comment within the unsustainable system.

There are plenty of examples of the changes that people want to see and to make, from UN75 and other surveys, we need to remove the barriers that prevent those changes from becoming realities. Greater attention to cultural rights and rights-based approaches would greatly facilitate such a transformation.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share this submission, and wish you good luck in preparing your report. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide any further information you require.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours sincerely,



Henry McGhie, museum consultant and founder, Curating Tomorrow

1. <https://www.ipbes.net/glossary-tag/empowerment> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.museumsforclimateaction.org/reimagine/exhibits> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.thewhitaker.org/about-us/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.cbd.int/doc/publications/addis-gdl-en.pdf>, <https://zenodo.org/record/7755805#.ZET1iPzMK38> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/museums-and-human-rights2-2020.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://baltic-museums-libraries-sdg.lnb.lv/home/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://muzeji.lv/lv/ilgtspeja-muzejos/iam-latvijas-muzejos> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://muzeji.lv/lv/ilgtspeja-muzejos/muzejiem-par-iam> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWo7fuGbYsw> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.churchillfellowship.org/ideas-experts/fellows-directory/henry-mcghie/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.churchillfellowship.org/news-views/blogs/building-a-culture-of-peace-in-harmony-with-nature-one-museum-at-a-time/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.facebook.com/MuirMatters/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/mainstreaming-the-sustainable-development-goals-in-galleries-libraries-archives-and-museums-curating-tomorrow-2021.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://ocm.iccrom.org/> (select SDG targets at the bottom right). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)