

Culture, Development, and Identity



By Roberto Valent
and Lodovico Folin-Calabi

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, recognizes for the first time the essential role of culture as a driver of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Through the 2030 Agenda, the international community has thus recognized the essential role of culture as an enabler of development. Culture is featured most prominently in Sustainable Development Goal 11, which aims to “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” and calls to “Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.”

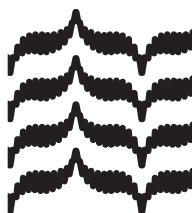
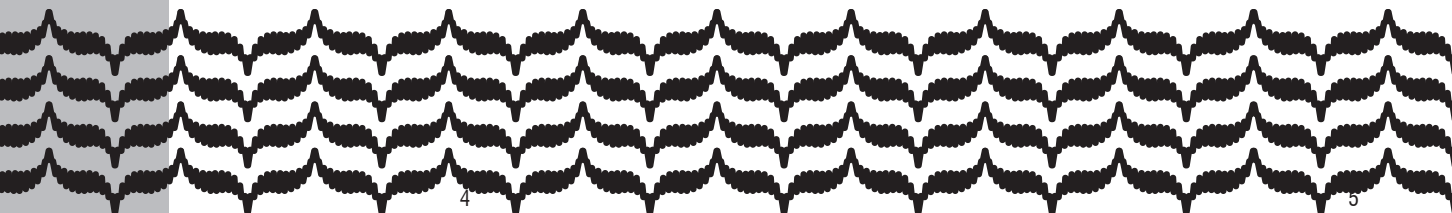
Through its Assistance Development Framework for the State of Palestine (2018-2022), signed with the Government of Palestine on 15 June this year, UNDP and UNESCO, as part of the UN Country Team in Palestine, will support the Palestinian Government and its people in their efforts to promote Palestinian culture. However, the resolve and commitment of the Palestinian people and the involved communities remain crucial in

bringing about the success or failure of everything we do. These communities have been forged through their shared identity and by the collective culture that over time has tied people together. Be it through traditional clothing, the shared struggle for recognition, or the traditions and beliefs that are bound to the most important collective moments of their lives, the strength, power, and endurance of Palestinian culture can be found all around us. These rituals and shared symbols are the mementos of a collective identity and common cause and have proven Palestinian cultural identity to be resistant despite the growing challenges it has been facing.

But what does culture mean for the development of Palestine?

Palestinians, no doubt, exhibit one of the most resilient and enduring cultures in the world. Despite the incredible pressure of occupation, this society has resolutely refused to let go of tradition, a sense of humor, and a passion for community. But despite this incredible resilience, the threats to Palestinian cultural heritage and identity are ever increasing. The split between Gaza and the West Bank, checkpoints, and the Barrier are pushing communities further and further away from each other, dividing and further fragmenting Palestine.

For many Palestinians, their cultural treasures are too frequently out of reach. The awe-inspiring Old City of Jerusalem is cut off from both Gaza and the West Bank, and therefore inaccessible for the majority of Palestinians who live in these areas. Many historical and natural wonders are located in Area C, under full Israeli control, preventing many Palestinians the right to access and to fully enjoy them – also weakening the sustainable development and effective management of infrastructure and of natural and cultural resources. Under the current blockade, Gaza’s treasures are not only isolated from most Palestinians and the rest of the world but also under the threat of destruction from war and economic decline. The question we must ask ourselves is: given these restrictions, how can we



Young talented Palestinians are adding their exciting new touches and innovative approaches to traditional crafts.

support Palestinian cultural resilience and innovation?

Culture and development should go hand in hand: strengthen one and you strengthen the other as well. At UNESCO and UNDP, we know that culture and identity can provide the means to build a resilient and prosperous State of Palestine. But we also know that Palestinian communities need support to meet their urgent needs, so they can prosper and thrive culturally and otherwise.

UNDP and UNESCO are working to boost livelihoods in order to help ensure that communities have the resources and economic security to come together and support each other. Frequently, cultural activities support economic development. As manufacturing has been hit hard over the last fifty years – leading to huge losses of jobs and regarding economic growth, especially affecting women, youth and vulnerable groups – we are supporting a resurgence of critical cultural industries, such as textiles, so that traditional Palestinian crafts may serve not only as an important backbone of cultural identity, but also as a way out of poverty.

When an economy is struggling

The keffiyeh, reborn as bold fashion for the twenty-first century trendsetters, is deeply rooted in history and tradition.

or emerging from the devastation of conflict, support to the arts and to cultural projects are frequently the first expenditures to be cut. But even though humanitarian action and services are of course critical, we have to remember that heritage and creativity, as expressions of identity and repositories of memory and knowledge, foster sustainable recovery and as such are an essential source of support for communities in crisis – despite conflict and disaster. To bring smiles to the faces of Gaza's traumatized children and youth, we urgently need to invest in the therapeutic power of art, theatre, and music. Palestinian forms of self-expression continue to capture the imagination of our global and connected world, and we must continue to support the people in creating them.

The cultural and creative industries are among the fastest growing in the world, representing 30 million jobs worldwide. Global trade in creative goods more than doubled between 2004 and 2013, and today the contribution of the creative economy amounts to 6.1% of the global economy. The creative economy also employs more people aged 15 to 29 years than any other sector.

It is vital that the State of Palestine

capitalizes on this proud nation's incredible array of natural, cultural, and historic assets. Culture and cultural industries can contribute not only to Palestinian economic growth but also to the empowerment of women, youth, and other marginalized groups. UNDP is furthermore investing in the preservation of Palestinian architectural treasures, such as Maqam Nabi Musa, or in the rehabilitation and promotion of unique agro-cultural landscapes, such as around Battir, so that they will stand tall for prosperous future generations to enjoy.

Conserving these sites is about more than just protecting Palestinian cultural riches from decay. These ancient wonders, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, provide enormous potential for a strong and prosperous tourism industry. They are already attracting thousands of tourists, pilgrims, and adventurers every year, and the numbers are growing steadily. The money these tourists bring spreads throughout the economy, creating jobs, funding infrastructure improvements, and increasing livelihoods.

We know that when we invest in Palestinian culture, we can see communities thriving. Culture-driven development spurs further cultural innovation and growth, and the results are spreading far and wide throughout Palestinian society. That is why UNDP and UNESCO are investing in Palestinian culture: to secure that the treasures of Palestinian identity, history, and community may be enjoyed by all Palestinians and by the world. Culture denotes who we are, where we have been, and where we are going;

development cannot be sustainable without it, in Palestine and elsewhere in the world.

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