

# The place of culture in the European Union's external relations

## Background note prepared by Relais Culture Europe

The cultural dimension of the EU's external activity is of increasing relevance in European cultural debates. As one of the goals of the *European Agenda for Culture* presented by the Commission in 2007 and the focus of a formal ad hoc meeting held under the Slovenian presidency in May 2008, culture is now considered an important issue in the EU's external affairs or, at least, a topical one.

The "culture and external relations" issue goes beyond European borders. It arises within a global context characterised by a shared realisation of the emergence of international cultural issues (among which a cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, but also cultural rights or the relationship between culture and development) and by a growing consensus on the need to develop instruments and policies able to meet these challenges.

The EU, for its part, has launched a working and thinking process to strengthen its external cultural chapter. The adoption of the *UNESCO Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions* certainly was a key feature of this process, but it is not the only one.

On the ground, many European cultural actors are involved in international cooperation projects taking place outside Europe. From a lobbying point of view, however, the cultural sectors seem little interested in the international dimension of the issue and has barely explored it. And yet it is a matter of European cultural action: the international cultural challenges, the issues they raise, the decisions made and the tools developed to take them up, all have a direct impact on our practices, projects and societies.

Though the development of a true EU competence in the cultural field is still to be defined (both inside and outside the EU), the fact remains that European cultural actors contribute to an international cultural framework.

By dedicating one day of our conference to the place of culture in the EU's external relations, we are:

- Understanding and clarifying the action and role of the EU in a cultural field which is fairly recent and still little known to European cultural actors in general, and to our members in particular, even though many of them are already involved in international cooperation projects;
- Identifying international cultural challenges, their impact on the society and world we live in, as well as on our practices and international cooperation projects;
- Identifying the role we play and could play in strengthening the EU's external cultural action, the interests we have to defend in this field, and the type of benefits we may expect.

### I. The EU's external cultural action: a developing framework

The increasing interest of the EU in developing and strengthening the cultural dimension of its external action can be illustrated by several examples, at different levels:

#### A. At policy and global level

- **The UNESCO Convention: point of departure and focal point of external cultural action.** After playing a major role in the negotiation of the UNESCO Convention on cultural diversity and after ratifying it (ratification by the EU and its Member States), the EU now promotes the ratification process through its bilateral relations with third countries. A Cultural chapter is being integrated in all new bilateral trade agreements signed by the EU (such a chapter has already been included in the agreement signed with the Cariforum States) and the ratification of the Convention is also promoted by the EU in its policy dialogues with several third countries (Russia, China, India and soon Brazil).
- **The European Agenda for Culture.** As the first step towards a coherent and longer-term European cultural strategy, The European Agenda for Culture published by the European Commission in May 2007 and adopted by the Council in November 2007 identifies three main objectives, including the 'promotion of culture as an essential feature of the EU's external relations'.

#### B. Regional approaches

- **Euro-Mediterranean: from intercultural dialogue to a global cultural strategy.** So far, the cultural vision of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership<sup>1</sup> has been focused on intercultural dialogue. To echo the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, 2008 is also the Euro-Mediterranean Year of Intercultural Dialogue. This approach promotes a broad vision of culture, of social or societal nature (gender equality, press freedom, youth exchanges...), and thereby tends to leave out issues directly related to the cultural sector as such. The limits of this approach seem to have finally been identified. In the conclusions of the Euromed Ministerial Meeting on Culture held in Athens in May 2008, it was therefore suggested that a Euro-Mediterranean cultural strategy be developed, based on two pillars: intercultural dialogue, and cultural policy.

<sup>1</sup> Formalised in the third chapter of the Barcelona process.

- **Culture and development in Africa-Caribbean-Pacific countries (ACP).** The ACP region saw the earliest development of cultural cooperation and programmes. Actions in this area are the most visible, with specific projects directly focused on highly cultural issues such as the structuring of sectors; training of cultural actors; mobility and international market access.
- **Culture and European enlargement:** a consequence of 'enlargement fatigue', part of the European action in this specific area (Western Balkans + Turkey) is aimed at reinforcing civil society and promoting population exchanges and meetings. In this context, the European Commission considers cultural actors as a category of civil society with the recognised potential to improve mutual perceptions<sup>1</sup>.

### **C. On the ground: new instruments for culture**

- **At international level:** new multi-annual thematic programmes have been launched, for example: "Invest in human resources", with a clearly defined cultural chapter, and "Non state actors and local authorities in development", open to cultural actors but with no clear priority in this field.
- **At regional level:** European cultural actions are most developed and visible in the ACP and Euro-Mediterranean regions, with specific agreements and dedicated programmes. In Latin America, the Mercosur region works to strengthen the audiovisual and cinematographic sectors as drivers of regional integration, and a programme of support is currently under development. In Asia, the dialogue between Europe and Asia<sup>2</sup> is covered by cooperation programmes, with a particular focus on "cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue".
- **At bilateral level,** culture has been identified by some countries as a priority area and programmes have been or are being developed. This is the case in Mexico, Haiti, India, Mali and Benin, for example.

## **II. Limits and precautions**

### **A. Developing an external cultural policy: a long-term process**

- **The European Community policy cycle: long and out of touch with the reality of the grassroots**

From a political point of view: the EU's international cultural actions are not so new. Some cultural agreements, especially in the

<sup>1</sup> This is the case in Turkey, for example, with the "Civil Society Dialogue" programme, initiated under the previous programming cycle.

<sup>2</sup> In the framework of the Asian European Meeting (ASEM).

ACP region, were concluded a long time ago, and the preparatory discussions for the UNESCO Convention started years earlier in its adoption. Yet, a political framework is only about to be formalised and it will take time for this framework to be translated in well-funded programmes and actions.

From an institutional point of view: the place of culture in EU external relations is not self-evident for the services of the European Commission, though an awareness seems to be emerging within DG DEV and DG RELEX.

From a programming point of view: the latest policy positions in favour of external cultural cooperation should bring about new support models for culture. It will not be immediate, however, since those policy developments still need to be integrated into the EU programming system before entering into force. No radical changes are expected before the next programming period (2014), at the earliest. 2009 will however be a key preparatory moment since it corresponds to the mid-term assessment of the current programmes.

- **A fragile vision of the role of culture:** culture remains a non-consensual issue. Not only does the definition of cultures still raises many questions, but the role of culture in the EU's external relations has also different levels of interpretation.

For Member States, culture remains an internal policy and a diplomatic tool promoting national prestige. Many Member States are still questioning the role of the EU in this field. Yet, the Council of Culture Ministers in adopting the *European Agenda for Culture* and its "external relations" objective opened a new window for the development of specific European actions in this domain. No specific "external relations" working group, however, was set up within the Open Method of Coordination framework.

Partner States (third countries) also experience some difficulty in fully grasping the cultural issues at all levels. A good example is the insistence of some third countries that audiovisual or religious issues be included in the cultural chapter of trade agreements. Even when culture features in cooperation documents, they are not necessarily translated into programmes or actions. Yet, a working framework seems to be emerging at this level as well.

For grassroots actors, the question is not clear-cut either. Visions widely vary from country to country, which explains why European cultural actors find it so difficult to formulate common political recommendations in this field.

**B. Today's challenges and needs:**

- **Globalising the external cultural approach of the EU:** in spite of a first step taken towards coherent or ganisation, the external cultural action of the EU remains fragmented, both in its principles and implementation. Several services of the EU Commission deal with the cultural chapter of external policies<sup>1</sup>. Besides, it seems that the policy agenda does not always evolve in parallel with the development of the programmes and actions. Such fragmentation is reinforced by the centralisation and deconcentration of the Commission's services, mainly through the EU delegations in third countries.

At present, only a few regions have concluded clear cultural agreements with the EU and translated them into programmes. In the Euro-Mediterranean area, only two thematic programmes<sup>2</sup> (now closed) were developed in the field of culture. As a cross-sectoral instrument for intercultural dialogue, the Anna Lindh Foundation has identified no priorities specific to the cultural sector. This problem also arises in other fields. In the pre-accession countries, the dialogue between civil societies identifies no cultural priority either. In the thematic programmes, only the "Investing in human resources" programme has a cultural chapter, and its budget is limited to 30 million euros for 2007-2013. Actually, a great part of the cultural action developed in third countries does not receive any support from the EU. The audiovisual sector and the cultural industries remain the main recipient of the limited EU support.

- **Concretising this approach:** for the time being, some of the global cultural challenges identified as key issues by the EU have not yet gone beyond the stage of formal political statements. As it has been underlined already, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between artistic and cultural issues and intercultural dialogue, for example. As to the tools, the Communication of the Commission mentions the creation of an ACP fund aimed at promoting the relationship between culture and development, but it has not been established so far.

<sup>1</sup> Directorates General of Education and Culture, Development, External Relations, Enlargement, Trade, EuropeAid...

<sup>2</sup> Euromed Heritage and Euromed Audiovisual

**What to expect from the EU as to external cultural action and what role can we play?**

The "culture and external relations" debate actually raises the issue of the place and role of Europe in the world, and therefore of the European project in general. As the EU is a global project, its cultural dimension is just as important inside European borders as it is outside. Moreover, the problems arising inside and outside the EU are related, if not identical (cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, access to culture...).

The work of the European institutions (mainly the Commission) to develop an external cultural dimension notably results in a strong commitment to acknowledge the relationship between culture and development, or the role of cultural actors in strengthening civil society.

It is important to understand that, generally speaking, cultural action of the EU at international level is aimed at third countries' actors and stakeholders. Its goal is to facilitate the access of third countries' professionals to international markets, and that of developing countries' populations' access to their own culture.

Following this rationale, we must be aware that the EU's external cultural action will not help us in exporting or spreading our international activities, for this is not part of its mission and objectives. Following a development-oriented rationale, however, the EU's external cultural action can assist us in our cooperation projects involving third countries, so long as they strengthen our international partners (transfer of experience, support and monitoring, with a view to promote and empower local cultural actors).

Cultural operators should engage in those debates in order to feed the process launched by the EU. Engaging in those issues also provides us with an occasion to discuss the role of European stakeholders (EU, Member States, Regions, etc.) in international cultural action and especially our role, as cultural operators, in this context. Finally, this is an opportunity to "Europeanise" our approach, by reflecting on the nature of our engagement in the development of the European project – both at internal and external levels – and on our vision of Europe in the world, as artists and cultural professionals, but also as citizens.