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Editorial: The politics of sustainable development in cultural policies

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Editorial on the Research Topic

The politics of sustainable development in cultural policies

Sustainable development is a complex and adaptable concept with a rich historical backdrop intricately woven with the evolution of developmental ideologies. While its origins reach back to concerns over the consumption of natural resources in the 18th century (Du Pisani, 2006), its most referenced definition was formulated through the United Nations in 1987, when the Brundtland Commission positioned social, environmental, and economic dimensions as essential components of long-term sustainability. This understanding drizzled down through the UN system, becoming a cornerstone for the work of various UN agencies (UNESCO, ILO, WHO, etc.), and guiding the implementation of sustainability policies in their Member States. Paralleling this process, UNESCO adopted sustainable development in the 1980s and 1990s to continue its efforts to construct cultural policy as a specific sector (Alasuutari and Kangas, 2020). The final report of The World Decade for Cultural Development (1988–1997), Our Creative Diversity (1996), laid out foundations for highlighting particular roles of culture within this conceptually evolving constellation.

International efforts to integrate culture into sustainable development frameworks have emphasized the need to balance the essential role of culture with economic, social, and environmental issues. This initial consensus was, however, short-lived, as the conceptual configuration went through numerous reformulations to identify new pillars of sustainable development, as well as to critique the pillars metaphor itself. Anthropocentric views continued to remain stronger than eco-centric ones within these new conceptualisations, and rising environmental concerns still included in development discourses. Alternative perspectives have emerged, such as planetary wellbeing (Kortetmäki et al., 2021), which have criticized the politics of sustainable development, particularly for its human-centered paradigm, urging us to acknowledge that culture is not a separate entity but enmeshed within nature.

One of the central aims of cultural policy is to advance sustainability through the promotion of cultural rights and cultural participation. Effective sustainability actions, in general, have also long been rooted in civic engagement and direct participation (Duxbury et al., 2017). To advance and propel action, the active agency embedded in diverse cultural practices, including traditional ecological knowledge, is imperative. In this context, all levels of policy and action—from local to international—are significant.

In the international policy arena, it has become increasingly evident that the prerequisites for sustainability-based supranational cultural politics rely on shared commitments and ideals, which require renegotiating as they are integrated into often interest-driven national policies. A reluctance or inertia in rethinking the definitions of culture in the framework of sustainable development and cultural policy may have contributed to a divide between the broader debates on sustainable development and developments in cultural policy, with culture frequently left aside. At the same time, the role of subnational authorities in propelling local tools for sustainable development trajectories in cultural policy has proven challenging (Jeannotte and Duxbury, 2015). All of this has pushed cultural policy to the point of critical self-reflection, requiring a re-conceptualization of its foundations and intents, but also leading to sustainable development issues gaining greater prominence in cultural policy research. From this premise, this Research Topic addresses critical contestations of the politics in cultural policies for sustainable development.

Two of the articles in this Research Topic address questions of sustainability in relation to preservation, heritage, and (dis)continuity. Huttunen's case study of the controversial inclusion of the "Documents of Nanjing Massacre" in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register renders visible the points of friction that arise when the questions of who gets to define which cultural narratives are to be preserved, why, and on whose terms are placed at the center of inquiry. The fact that, in the case presented in the article, Japan managed to negotiate concessions despite losing the moral high ground goes to show that the country holds some of the strongest negotiation power in the East Asian region, even in the heritage diplomacy framework provided by UNESCO. As choices to engage with one interpretation of the past at the expense of another cannot provide a road to peace and reconciliation, the article suggests that a future direction of accommodating a multi-perspective approach to history and heritage might offer a solution. Kulbok-Lattik et al.'s study of Estonian community houses provides an example of adapting to different political systems and creating a national and local public sphere amidst changing contexts, disruptions, and discontinuity. While the authors highlight the community houses' legacy as contributors to cultural practices, shared belongingness, and the political formation of the local public sphere, the challenge is whether new generations will be able and willing to maintain these traditions. The authors propose designing a more sustainable actor model for the local level that depends not only on cultural policy solutions but increasingly on balanced regional and economic development.

Three articles analyse participatory forms of local cultural governance aiming for sustainable development. Luonila et al. set their focus on the potential of cultural participation in enhancing community resilience and its central role in promoting sustainable urban development. The case study of two neighborhoods in Jyväskylä, Finland, reveals a potentially baneful discrepancy in how cultural activities are recognized as a strategic component in achieving the city's social and economic aims while in practice, the resources allocated to these activities remain minor, demanding a deeper focus on the negotiations between community actors and public officials. Zemite and Kunda's place-based approach to sustainable development through the case of Valmiera

County's bid for the European Capital of Culture 2027 finds the relationship between cultural and creative industries and municipalities essential. A municipality's cultural policy decisions and good alignment of the interpretations of key stakeholders must consider local resources, needs and capabilities, and grassroots knowledge and preferences. However, especially in non-urban areas, cooperation between these sectors is limited due to the lack of an intermediary. Therefore, a cultural and creative sector striving to renew its traditional operating environment must realize this role to generate a place-based foundation for culture in local sustainable development.

Järvelä's article analyses the relationship between culture and sustainable development in the context of social resilience and adaptive capacity at the local level. Contemporary supranational risks such as climate change, pandemics, or escalating military conflicts demand the identification of vulnerabilities and the creation of attainable adaptation measures. From this perspective, cultural sustainability can be increasingly associated with identifying those risks, envisioning attainable adaptation measures, and including cultural sustainability in development strategies to articulate more visible and attainable trajectories. In this context, increasing the participation of local actors (participatory governance) is crucial in terms of social change and adaptation. Local cultural capacity enables communities to adopt new initiatives and reforms that promote local and broader regional adaptation efforts. Furthermore, when interest in local cultural sustainability grows, it can mean promoting new contributions of local adaptability based on preserving and continuing cultural heritage and traditions and producing culture, cultural objects, or other cultural productions.

Finally, Pykkönen proposes a critical rethinking of how theories and concepts concerning the nature-culture relationship and ecological citizen-subjectivity could challenge the hegemonic economist and anthropocentric sustainability discourses in international cultural policies. Through a discourse analysis of the major international documents and institutions maintaining these approaches, the article calls for new kinds of policy mechanisms that manifest and promote "sustainable culture."

Altogether, the articles underscore the crucial role of local actors in the solutions and implementations of cultural sustainable development activities. This message is also reflected in the recommendations, programmes, and plans transmitted to the national level through international organizations seeking for local actors to be responsible for implementation. Local actors and actions reveal the need for cross-sectoral governance and place-based policies integrating community resilience and traditional ecological knowledge. These approaches and the changing applications of cultural policy in these contexts need further analysis and development in practice.

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