# The Future of World Culture. The MONDIACULT 2025 Conference in Barcelona: Concepts and practices for a 'joint human culture' in the era of de- and re-globalisation

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**Abstract**

From 29 September to 1 October 2025, Barcelona hosted what is nominally the world's largest cultural conference: the UNESCO MONDIACULT Conference, organised by the Spanish government on behalf of the United Nations. The focus was on creating a joint human culture for the future. The conference is already now regarded as historic: for the first time, culture was set to be declared a standalone development goal for the world in the coming years. To this end, an 18th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on 'Culture' is being planned as a stand-alone goal for the post-2030 sustainability agenda. Thirdly, the first global fact sheet on the status and interconnection of international cultural policies was published at the 2025 MONDIACULT. The aim for the coming years is to raise these policies to a more unified level and enhance their standing within the spectrum of sectoral policies. At the intersection of these three pillars, the conference's fourth focal point was the long-term future of global culture as a whole, where the influence of artificial intelligence is destined to grow just as rapidly as the role of culture in promoting peace. Together, these themes made MONDIACULT 2025 a milestone for the future role of culture in the wider development of the globe – provided its findings are taken up by the global community of nations, NGOs and private actors.

**Keywords:** Soft futures; immaterial futures; culture; cultures; UNESCO MONDIACULT

The topic of culture as a future inter- and trans-disciplinary core force of development represents a potentially significant evolution in the history of ideas, particularly with regard to the conception of 'the future' as immaterial driver of globalized societies, which exactly through the lens of culture can be seen as an interrelated whole. In all this, the MONDIACULT 2025 conference served as a counterpoint to the contemporary phase of global politics, where neo-nationalist *realpolitik* dominates rather than culture or even internationalist idealism. Yet it was precisely the

modern idealism of a unified humanity that lay behind the founding of the only truly shared platforms available to humankind to the present day: the United Nations and its specialised sub-agencies such as UNESCO, the world's educational, scientific and cultural organization, and UNU, the United Nation's university structure. The resulting overall perspective towards a "cultural future" of the globe leaves many questions open. Let us try to answer some of them!

## The MONDIACULT Conference

The MONDIACULT Conference is the United Nations' periodic World Conference on Culture, understood in the broadest possible sense and with a strong contemporary and futures' touch. It brings together all the countries of the world from a cultural perspective. It is the world's largest conference on the state and future of human culture. It takes place every three years, organised by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. More than 2,500 cultural practitioners, experts and government representatives from 163 member states, as well as 83 UNESCO Chairs, over 100 ministers of culture and more than 20 ministerial negotiating committees, gathered in Barcelona to reflect together on the challenges and prospects for human culture in the 2020s and 2030s.

At its core, the focus was on (past) differences and (future) commonalities. MONDIACULT 2025 served to identify and articulate concrete shared cultural goals and cultural policies, as had already been done in Mexico in 2022. As such, the World Cultural Meeting was a gathering that ran counter to the main direction of global political development, as it strengthened global multilateralism. Building on this conference, the 163 UN member states (plus several actors with observer status) will focus in the coming years on a new global agenda in favour of 'fundamentally more culture in global development' – across all sectors of society and at all economic and social levels. This motto may sound straightforward, even simplistic, but in practice it is a noble and complex goal that can only be achieved through a joint, cross-cutting effort. 'More culture' in global development would change a great deal. It would create a more inclusive environment for politics and business – and foster the global coexistence of people from different historical and geographical backgrounds throu-

gh a form of 'soft power' that no longer serves purely as a mechanism for attraction, power and dominance, thereby redefining the concept and imbuing it with deeper substance and a 'softer' spirit.

**From humanity culture to human culture**

To begin at the start of all things, there is a question that is crucial to everything that follows: what exactly is meant by 'world culture' or even 'humanity's culture' which would ultimately lead us to an encompassing concept of 'human culture'? Surely there are different cultures in the world, not just one? Yes, of course. But despite all the differences, there are substantial common features. The Post-2030 Agenda, which is now just around the corner, deliberately focuses on a broad concept of culture – in contrast to the narrow one we usually apply to cultural production. This approach, which is in principle as broad as possible, is nothing other than logical when it comes to cross-national commonalities. For this concept of culture must, at the global level, be broad enough to be truly globally sustainable, as it must be supported by 193 UNESCO member states (plus twelve actors with observer status). At the lowest common denominator of a world conference, culture can be defined in the broadest possible terms as that aspect of the social sphere which can be passed on. Taken across civilisations, culture is the distillation of communal ways of life and behaviour that structurally shape human coexistence in an intangible way, making it more predictable and, from a certain point in time and level of maturity, developing a transgenerational value. This is the same in all parts of the world, and it shapes human history across the ages and within the most diverse civilisations.

How, then – across linguistic and geographical histories – one can explain the depiction of culture in the sense of such a deliberately broad concept? Is it possible to understand its emergence, without delving into the differences between various cultural histories or political and economic systems, perhaps in a convergent manner through the lens of anthropology and the history of ideas? This is precisely where UNESCO comes in, to create convergences and focus on what is most fundamental and shared. The basic motifs consist of simple building blocks. Our living conditions create habits that depend on the environment. A harbour creates different conditions, behavioural and developmental prerequisites

than a mountainous region; a desert different ones than a forest. This gives rise to different ways of life among people. Those who move within an environment learn to live there. As generations follow one another, this gradually gives rise to certainties, collective beliefs and, ultimately, rituals. These eventually develop into right-and-wrong nodes that convey a certain basic ethic and morality, and from there into values. In representations such as dances, songs, sculptures, paintings or narratives, these values become self-aware. They can be experienced, nurtured and refined time and again. This leads them towards a sublimation that transforms them into culture. Starting from such procedures, processes and works, cultural values in turn influence our ways of life and behaviour. They structure them with 'more' and a more stable meaning. This cyclical system creates order and, with it, trust in life. That is why communities call the whole of this cycle 'culture' – and pass it on, consciously and unconsciously, from generation to generation. The transmission of culture is an expression of what is arguably the finest human quality: that we want the best for each other.

**Slow culture**

So culture is not something erratic, positively surprising, 'sudden', or even something that defies expectations, as is often claimed in post-post-modernism? Of course it is that too, and in many contexts this is exceptionally productive. Especially in modern Western European cultural circles, which, since the Industrial Revolution with its mechanical logic and rhythmic monotony, have required human-induced disruption as a cultural asset. But fundamentally, culture – even in today's civilisational contexts – is more about being embedded in a familiar environment of understanding and continuity, conveying a basic meaning that has largely become unquestioned. Culture is what human communities give one another as a source of security and courage. In this context, rupture and continuity can often go hand in hand. One does not exclude the other.

But the result is that culture is not 'fast', but 'slow' – at least on a large scale. Beyond its individual manifestations–which range from conservative to progressive, from emerging to reproductive, and from experimental to conservative–culture is, in principle, the aspect of society that changes most slowly among all its fundamental characteristics, driv-

ing forces or parameters–for the reasons cited, and despite all the European-Western-inspired avant-gardes. For although culture constantly 'speaks' through forms, in its substance it is the most unspoken among people, because it conveys values that recognise themselves as identity-forming and thus worth preserving. Culture is what creates the environment for all other life practices. That is precisely why it is shared 'as a matter of course' among people and continues to exist among them. This does not, of course, mean that it cannot be critical, go against the grain, or even be deliberately provocative or disruptive – indeed, culture does this time and again, increasingly so as individualisation progresses, and to the great benefit of modern communities. Whatever culture does, it always engages with values, whether dialectically or not.

**Culture as a unifying force**

Against this complex backdrop, the most important topic at the MONDIACULT conference in Barcelona is that, throughout human history, culture has often had a rather divisive effect between the major regions of the world, particularly their geo-anthropo-expressive value formations. Today we have reached a point where it may increasingly be able to act as a unifying force.

The many crises of recent years, such as Covid and wars, have not weakened culture, but have greatly increased the need for it. People need more meaning that sustains and connects them, rather than dividing them. In private life, in the public sphere, and in between. Most people feel this – everywhere, across different political and economic systems, regardless of status and class. The cultural sector reflects this development. This was demonstrated in Barcelona by the first global report on the state of cultural policies, presented by UNESCO. It is the first report to cover all regions and cultural sectors of the world. It provides the factual basis for the UN's call for "more culture" as a fundamental structural element of development and the strengthening of multilateral cooperation. This first global report was largely funded by the EU. This is no coincidence. For the EU advocates much more strongly for a shared, "middle-ground" world culture than other actors such as China or the current US. In contrast, the latter two are engaged in a movement towards neo-nationalism, which both cloak in strong cultural terms – in China as Xi Jinping's 'new

Chinese dream of the great Chinese rejuvenation', and in the US as an internal culture war over 'Make America Great Again'.

**Culture: The missing SDG**

What does the Global Report on Cultural Policies say? The subtitle "Culture: The missing SDG" speaks volumes. According to UNESCO, it is based on 1,200 national and local reports as well as 200 case studies compiled between 2019 and 2024. As the report shows, 93% of UNESCO's 193 Member States now include culture as a central element in their national plans for sustainable development. This is a significant increase from 88% in 2021. The cultural and creative industries account for 3.39% of the global gross domestic product of around 100 trillion US dollars and 3.55% of total employment among the world's 8 billion people. In 2023, cultural tourism generated 741.3 billion US dollars across 250 cities included in the report.

That sounds very good. But on the one hand, data is still lacking for increasingly important parts of the world, particularly for the Global South and Africa in particular. On the other hand, despite this progress, major inequalities persist between different regions of the world. This is also because culture is measured and recorded differently, assessed in terms of society as a whole, and weighted socio-economically. According to UNESCO, public spending on culture in Europe and North America averages 418.56 US dollars per capita per year. This is thirteen times higher than in the rest of the world combined. As UNESCO notes in its summary of the findings, this underscores "the need for inclusive, evidence-based policies that tackle inequalities whilst harnessing technological innovation." The aim of the desired, stronger cross-system networking, coordination and integration of cultural policies is generational and gender justice and, fundamentally, the promotion of positive and cooperative diversity within communities – wherever in the world this is possible.

What are the challenges? Changing governments, ideologies and objectives. The task is not an easy one, because with 193 UN member states and 11 associate members, something is constantly changing somewhere, and because political, economic and cultural systems are in a state of flux. This is all the more true in today's phase of 'liquid modernity', as sociologists and philosophers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Villem

Flusser have termed it. Convergences and differences between the global North and South play a role here. They are driving much of the current cultural development between North and South.

## Global North vs. Global South

What differences have there been – and continue to be – in cultural development between the Global North and the Global South? Over the past 50 years, these differences have tended to grow rather than diminish. Paradoxically, this has occurred in spite of the global trend towards technological standardisation and the aspects of globalisation that are actually meant to bring people together. In the Global North, since the 1970s, despite the 'horizontal' cultural upheaval of the 1968 cultural revolution, culture has in fact become increasingly tied to elites, which was not the case in the South. In the North, literature, artistic production and theatre became increasingly characterised by intellectual self-criticism, even within mass society. At the now-established mass universities, they were subjected to an ever-increasing 'deconstructive' academicisation, and in the process became less and less popular. This increased the potential for self-criticism and the understanding of the mechanisms and implications of cultural production in the narrower sense, thereby raising this production to a higher level. At the same time, however, it tended to dilute the broad civilisational influence of culture, understood in the broad sense mentioned at the outset. Culture became detached from the popular; it became narrower rather than broader. Culture in the sense of cultural production thus reached a higher level, but for fewer people. That is why, in the Global North today, we have a dual concept when we speak of culture – one that must always be clarified beforehand: are we talking about the narrow or the broad concept of culture? This then gave rise to compensatory genres situated midway between high culture and popular culture, such as cabaret in Austria, the *cantautori* in Italy, and stand-up comedians in England. In any case, since the 1970s, the Global North has undergone a process of intellectualisation that has often taken place at a national level – more unconsciously than consciously – and, despite the EU, to some extent within Europe as well. This was less the case in the Global South. There, the narrow and broad concepts of culture remain much more closely intertwined to this day, and are often barely, if at all,

distinguished in the perception of the majority.

### The role of AI

Is this a developmental divide that is coming to an end with new technologies such as AI and chatbots? Perhaps. In the second half of the 20th century, a divide also emerged in the Global North between traditional culture and technology. In the Global South, there remained areas where the culture of the people continued to live on, exerting greater influence than the practices of technology and high culture – some of which had been adopted from the North – and where it continues to play a strong role. With technology, this divergence could change. As far as we can see, humanity will become increasingly similar in its customs and daily routines in the 21st century, whether it be a young Chinese person or a young European. We therefore need to think more about how technology becomes transversal to cultural power; whether it creates more elitist or broader cultural practices; what role (new) classes play in this; what is actually being achieved in the bigger picture; and where, amidst all this, the future place should be, on the one hand, for local and regional cultures that have become historical, and on the other, for the productions of (post-)modern high cultures.

At MONDIACULT, most people agreed: AI has the potential to contribute to a cultural revolution in the coming years. Will AI spell the end of historiography, of memory canonised through sources and artefacts, of self-critical academia and its institutions – perhaps starting with colleges and universities? Above all, will the coming years see an end to the current significance of higher education and training? After all, the journal *Nature* has already launched its own series on 'The Future of Universities' – in which it is claimed that their future in the age of chatbots is anything but certain.

That need not be the case, but it could be. And if that is the case, then the AI-driven cultural transformation could well, by its very nature, begin in the higher education sector and thus also in the universities. The modern university, as we know it today, is ultimately a recent invention. In principle, the history of the institution itself goes back several hundred years. But the modern university in the contemporary sense was only invented in the 19th century as the so-called Humboldt University. Today's

form as a mass university is a product of the 1968 revolution and the associated rise of education as the gateway to social success and status. Contemporary university practice is therefore only 60 years old. It has hardly changed during this time, but has essentially reproduced itself from within – without social control – as the only institution of its kind! For this reason – due to its largely unique social self-sufficiency and self-referential nature – this institution is perhaps the least prepared for the AI revolution and actually risks massive changes. It is a young institution that pretends to be old and, unfortunately, is indeed so on the inside. Much of today's university is out of step with the times, a situation exacerbated by the AI transformation. Without bold innovation, the mass university will have little future in the chatbot age. This begins with the civil servant model, extends to disciplinary fragmentation and the demise of the intellectual, and reaches as far as re-ideologisation and the hitherto absence of future studies worthy of the name. Here, with a view to cultural development in the coming years, institutions are called upon to reposition themselves in an inter- and trans-disciplinary manner, for which future studies could serve as a convergence platform. This also concerns the global ideological crossroads between humanism and transhumanism, which will shape the coming decades for humanity. Here, we need trustworthy and complexity-capable sciences more than ever to stand up to false promises in the public sphere, to engage in enlightenment, to emphasise the human dimension, and to make techno-economic mechanisms transparent. It is precisely in these tasks that what we call culturalisation or, more generally, cultural achievement will consist in the coming years. Whether this is merely a sublimation or more in the sense of a holistic creative achievement is, for the time being, of secondary importance.

**The great convergence**

Let us return to the question of why cultures today should be allowed to converge rather than diverge. In the age of global technologies, they are becoming more alike, whether they want to or not. Think of the internet, computers and mobile phones. Since the 1990s at the latest, they have been aligning behavioural cultures across borders and have thus played a decisive role in shaping globalisation. Behavioural patterns have emerged that are similar across the globe – despite differing systemic contexts. In

the coming years, new technologies, but also modern mobility, are likely to lead to cultures growing ever closer together. In any case, there was broad consensus on this at the MONDIACULT conference in Barcelona. The only question is how, and with what consequences. In the coming years, culture may increasingly become a catalyst for a shared sense of humanity. However, this will only be the case if it remains culture – that is, if it does not become technology. In this process, culture may also be subject to logics of appropriation or even replacement. It is therefore important that further development is shaped wisely and, above all, through mutual exchange and under international scrutiny in the sharing of best practices. Here, culture remains dependent on politics exercising sound judgement.

## The quest for a world culture

A question that may seem naive, but which is asked far too rarely in national and civilisational contexts: Where does 'world culture' actually stand in the world today, if one can even say such a thing and were to mention only the most important points? Global culture is changing today primarily through three factors: firstly, new technologies. Secondly, growing inequality. And thirdly, by means of the age of polarisation and new conflicts. In the face of all three – technologies, inequality and conflicts – culture must prove its worth to demonstrate that it has not become secondary in its existing forms and that it can bring about both cohesion and change. That is why the three major themes in Barcelona were, firstly, the question: How do we shape global culture in the age of artificial intelligence in a way that is human-centred, not merely technological? The second question was: What influence can culture have on reducing inequality and promoting greater justice? And the third question was: How can we make better use of culture for peace?

With regard to new technologies, the global community is currently working within the UN framework to develop novel ethical instruments. To this end, UNESCO published the world's first 'Recommendations on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence' in 2021. Work is currently underway on an ethics of neurotechnologies: that is, the new sciences of the brain and consciousness. These could significantly alter humanity's self-image. That is why we need universal standards to guide how this should proceed.

Secondly: to reduce inequality, the MONDIACULT participants stated in their final declaration that culture should become a human right. To this end, work is to be carried out on an 18th Sustainable Development Goal on 'Culture' for the new sustainability agenda from 2030 to 2050. And thirdly: To harness culture as a peacemaker, UNTRAD was also founded in Bruges in 2021. This is the UN agency for non-traditional diplomacy. Culture plays a decisive role here. Diplomacy in the coming years is set to be much more culturally oriented than before, because traditional diplomacy is reaching its limits in an age of systemic competition between democracies and autocracies and is proving paralysed, for example, in the UN Security Council. Culture as diplomacy is, in my view, a good idea in light of the internal stagnation – or even the dismantling – of other institutions such as international law, which is rife in times of renationalisation.

## The role of culture in the global turmoil

To sum all this up, the crucial question today is surely: in times of artificial intelligence, inequality and 'absent peace', is culture becoming more or less important? We are generally seeing an increase in the significance of culture. For people need more human meaning, not (just) technical meaning. But at the same time, critics are quite rightly pointing out that culture is playing an ever-smaller role in the world because it is being replaced by technology. This process began with the combination of the internet and computers in the late 1980s and has since been reinforced by technological development. Today, we live in a global "chatbot culture" – from ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini or Mistral – with the prospect of quantum computers and fusion technologies that could soon take the whole thing to an even higher level. This is changing access to and the distribution of knowledge. Until now, universities, colleges and educational institutions have held a privileged position in society, just as cultural skills have essentially done since the dawn of humanity. Those who speak languages, possess knowledge and can write well have traditionally enjoyed high status in society. And universities and educational institutions have controlled the access and standards for this. This is now changing with AI and chatbots, which could lead to a decline in the significance of existing educational and training institutions, particularly universities, if they do not evolve towards competencies in creativity, the connection of

major themes with everyday life, and inter- and transdisciplinarity in the 'big-picture' view of problems.

One of the key skills in our globalised technological culture will likely be the ability to anticipate future challenges. The coming years will, one way or another, see a humanity that is very strongly defined by technology, and where our everyday lives threaten to have less and less to do with traditional culture and its role in fostering continuity and identity. That is why we need to establish cultural rights in order to find a balance in the creation of meaning and in how we interact with one another. People must not lose themselves or each other. For ultimately, we humans have only our lives and other people. That is precisely why 'culture' exists.

What does that mean in concrete terms: in terms of demands and programmes? That development cannot be sustainable, not even if it takes place at a very high level and is hyper-technological, if people cannot exercise their individual and collective cultural rights. The neoliberal pressure towards globalisation in the 30 years between 1990 and 2020 has tended to push cultural rights – for example, those of minorities and groups within certain social systems, particularly in the Global South, but also those of individuals – into the background. We must now formally re-promote and re-establish them at a global level. Cultural rights empower people to express both their self-attributed value and the values that extend beyond them. The two are interlinked and equally important. This is precisely why the UN intends, in the coming years, to elevate cultural rights first to the status of rights, and then perhaps even to human rights. This would be a development that would become relevant not just for one, but for practically all areas of society.

We can only enforce cultural rights in the political sphere if we have the facts and figures to back up our arguments. That is why the aforementioned UNESCO cultural policy report on mapping cultural activities and cultural consumption worldwide is so important. The result is clear: sustainability and culture are inextricably linked – now and in the coming decades.

**Europe and the World**

According to the announcement by the EU Commissioner for Culture at MONDIACULT in Barcelona, a European cultural compass is being

prepared in the face of new technologies. It is intended to strengthen human creativity in a fundamental and systemic way against generative technologies such as AI and chatbots. To this end, more funding is also to be made available for cultural practitioners. The aim is to strengthen humanistic cultural pillars both on a continental and international level in the face of the potential replacement of humans by AI in certain respects.

Europe remains a cultural meeting ground between West and East, North and South. Our prosperity is also due in part to cultural pluralism. Even though many people's sense of identity may have evolved beyond questions of cultural and ethnic affiliation, language, culture, interaction and community, underpinned by shared values, remain crucial aspects of our self-organisation and coexistence. Ultimately, Europe is a laboratory for the interaction of different cultures under the motto 'unity in diversity'. This is precisely what will become increasingly important internationally, and ultimately globally, in the years to come, right up to the middle of the century.

The issue of non-European cultures, which are playing an ever-greater role, particularly through urban centres, will play a significant part in negotiations regarding international cultural rights. The demand for culture as a human right is, on the one hand, important for strengthening diversity within unity. However, it can also become a divisive force in society if it is abused. If the vision of the MONDIACULT conference becomes reality, the public debate on this will not be an easy one, and it could be conducted in a somewhat controversial manner. There were already differing opinions on this at the conference in Barcelona. What is crucial is the right sense of proportion in how cultural rights are implemented in specific contexts. One thing is certain: the introduction of cultural rights is a highly productive topic for society. It must therefore be carefully considered and discussed in an inclusive manner; hasty steps are not advisable. On the other hand, we should take up the call for a new, 18th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for culture early and actively, in order to shape it in a participatory and equitable manner for all, especially for future generations. Many details, particularly regarding the sub-goals of a future standalone Culture SDG, remain unclear, as do the associated indicators

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## Conclusions

One thing is certain regarding the future of world culture: the cultures of the Global South will become more important, quite simply because more people are being born there, and also because there will be better justice. Our cultures in the Global North, where we have produced hyper-technology and an eschatological-linear view of history, are losing influence on a planetary scale partly because they have ever fewer people, and because they are becoming conscious that to rule alone makes no sense. But if we manage to continue fostering a strong sense of cultural self-awareness and successfully strike a balance between unity and diversity, we can position ourselves in an increasingly culturally defined international arena in an original, independent and creative manner, also through – and in the sense of – non-traditional diplomacy.

Culture continues to present a huge opportunity for humanity – perhaps more than ever before. We can use it to extract much that is positive from the current and forthcoming phases of re-globalisation, because we now have experience in navigating the tension between diversity and unity when it comes to the whole of an integrated developmental vision for the future. One thing is clear: every euro, dollar, dirham, yuan or yen invested in culture as a unifying force of the planet will, in the long term, pay off far more than some have previously expected. That is the lesson to be learnt from everything we have seen in the 2020s.