



Role of Culture, Cultural Expressions and Knowledge in Ensuring Sustainability: Learning from Southeast Asia

Introduction

Despite the United Nations' 2030 Agenda being a comprehensive blueprint for peace and prosperity, the absence of a dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on culture has presented a significant difficulty in achieving holistic and sustainable progress. Culture, in its tangible and intangible forms, intersects with all pillars of sustainable development- economic, social, and environmental- and must be fully recognised as a cross-cutting enabler. Although culture is implicitly referenced in targets related to education (SDG Target 4.7 that speaks of transformative education for sustainable development and global citizenship at all levels of learning); sustainable cities (SDG 11), and decent work (SDG Target 8.9 that encourages the need to devise and implement policies to support sustainable tourism for creation of jobs and promotion of local culture and products); it lacks an explicit goal of its own. The under appreciation of culture breaks progress towards inclusive development, especially in regions like Southeast Asia and South Asia, where diversity and tradition are foundational elements of society.

The UN Secretary-General's "Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet

Report of the Secretary-General (special edition)," released on 27 April, 2023 focused on this gap, underscored culture's role in shaping knowledge systems, supporting livelihoods, strengthening social cohesion, and driving environmental sustainability. The report specifically has indicated the role of culture in ensuring sustainability and supporting local and traditional knowledge systems. It mentions that culture is a global public good and a critical enabler of progress. It also says that culture is a source of knowledge, values and communication; it contributes to environmental sustainability. It advocates for greater integration of culture in achievements of the Goals."¹

UNESCO, through its preparation for the Pact for the Future at the Summit of the Future (2024), has advocated for the inclusion of culture in the post-2030 development agenda.² Action 11 of the document titled Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations, 2024 mentions that culture and sports provide a sense of identity and foster social cohesion. It also mentions that culture and sports can contribute to the health and well-being of the individuals.³

In view of this context, this policy brief explores examples from Southeast Asia to understand how the region is trying to integrate

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This policy brief by Dr Sampa Kundu, Consultant at the ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS. Author is grateful to Professor Sachin Chaturvedi, Vice-Chancellor, Nalanda University and Director General, RIS for his providing much guidance and insights in preparing this Policy Brief. Views are personal. Usual disclaimers apply. E-mail: sampa.kundu@ris.org.in

Box 1 - Culture related action points from Pact for the Future⁴

- a. “Ensure that culture as well as sport can contribute to more effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development, and integrate culture into economic, social and environmental development policies and strategies and ensure adequate public investment in the protection and promotion of culture;
- b. Encourage strengthened international cooperation on the return or restitution of cultural properties of spiritual, ancestral, historical and cultural value to countries of origin, including but not limited to objects d’art, monuments, museum pieces, manuscripts and documents, and strongly encourage relevant private entities to similarly engage, including through bilateral dialogue and with the assistance of multilateral mechanisms, as appropriate;
- c. Promote and support intercultural and interreligious dialogue to strengthen social cohesion and contribute to sustainable development”.

¹ UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet Report of the Secretary-General (special edition)” released on 27 April, 2023, A/78/80-E/2023/64.

² UN, Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations, 2024

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ The ASEAN, December 2023.

culture into sustainability practices. The brief will also explore Southeast Asia’s shared cultural heritage with India, and the strategic potential of the ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ACHL).

II. Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions in Southeast Asia: Corridor to Sustainability

Traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) are increasingly being recognised as sustainable alternatives to industrial practices. Traditional knowledge (TK) refers to the techniques, tools, skills and practices developed and sustained through generations within a community. On the other hand, traditional cultural expressions (TCEs) are the artistic or traditional representations of a community’s cultural and social identities.⁵ Both these two elements fall under the umbrella of intangible cultural heritage. Southeast Asia showcases multiple examples of having preserving TK and TCE and highlighting their relevance for sustainability.

1. **Sustainable Fashion (relevant for SDG 12):** The traditional batik textile production in Indonesia is a sustainable

alternative to fast fashion. It uses natural dyes and locally sourced materials, while preserving artisanal knowledge passed through generations.

2. **Climate Action and Biodiversity (SDGs 13, 15):** Agricultural systems based on indigenous practices, such as rice terracing in the Philippines and Vietnam, or the Subak system in Bali, align with ecosystem conservation and climate adaptation strategies.
3. **Waste Reduction (SDG 12):** ASEAN has been taking multiple efforts to reduce waste and promote responsible consumption. The ASEAN Workshop on Sustainable Heritage Food Packaging in Malaysia highlighted how traditional packaging methods using banana leaves and bamboo can drastically reduce plastic consumption.
4. **Artistic Reuse and Recycling (SDG 11):** The Lao PDR-led “ASEAN Young Creative Artwork” initiative reused recyclable materials for artistic expression, demonstrating how creativity can align with environmental objectives.
5. **Disaster Resilience (SDG 13):** Indigenous disaster-response practices are being revisited to complement scientific

systems. Traditional architecture, such as stilt houses in flood-prone areas, reflects climate-sensitive construction practices.

These practices demonstrate that culture, local and traditional knowledge and cultural expressions are not merely a passive inheritance but an active resource in achieving the SDGs. There are different other instances to show the awareness that prevails in Southeast Asia for cultural heritage, practices and strategies. Programmes like the Rhythm of Kinabalu Festival in Malaysia demonstrate how local cultural expressions - particularly traditional music and crafts - can drive community-led economic development and tourism.⁶ Similarly, ASEAN's "Creative City of Gastronomy" initiative supports MSMEs while promoting traditional cuisine, reinforcing food security, cultural continuity, and local economies.⁷ Such events strengthen community bonds and preserve intergenerational knowledge, aligning with SDG 8 (decent work) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

III. ASEAN Cultural Heritage List (ACHL): A Regional Platform for Cultural Sustainability

While UNESCO's heritage lists have global prestige and outreach, they often overlook region-specific or transnational elements. Southeast Asia, with only 4 per cent of global World Heritage Sites and 8 per cent of intangible cultural heritage elements, is significantly underrepresented. The ACHL aims to correct this imbalance.⁸ Key features of ACHL include:

- **Regional Value:** Unlike UNESCO's emphasis on "Outstanding Universal Value," the ACHL focuses on regional value emphasising shared traditions such as shadow puppetry, local architecture, and weaving techniques.

- **Bottom-up Approach:** It prioritises local and indigenous voices in heritage nomination and preservation.

- **Holistic Framework:** ACHL breaks from rigid tangible/intangible distinctions, reflecting the interconnectedness of cultural expressions.

The ACHL would not only showcase Southeast Asia's rich cultural diversity but also provide a model for other regions, including South Asia, to adopt regionally grounded heritage preservation mechanisms. ASEAN is also utilising its external partners in making ACHL a successful model for cultural preservation.

IV. ASEAN-India Cultural Parallels: Deep Roots, Shared Futures

India and Southeast Asia share profound cultural linkages, many rooted in centuries of maritime exchanges and the spread of Hindu-Buddhist religions, art, architecture, and epics.

- **Shared Narratives:** The Ramayana, central to shadow puppetry in Indonesia (Wayang), Cambodia (Sbek Thom), and Thailand (Nang Yai), is also central to Indian cultural expressions creating shared narratives.
- **Textile Traditions:** Weaving practices, such as Thailand's Lamphun silk and India's Banarasi or Assam silk, exhibit similar cultivation and dyeing techniques.
- **Cultural Practices:** The use of natural materials for food packaging in Southeast Asia resonates with Indian traditions like banana-leaf meals and eco-friendly rituals.
- **Heritage Architecture:** Borobudur, Angkor Wat, and Bagan reflect shared architectural similarities with Indian temples, signifying mutual influence.

These deep rooted shared cultural heritage need to be at the centre of ASEAN-India partnership and cultural strategy and diplomacy should focus more on the effective utilization of

⁶ Shah and Samsuddin, Rhythms of Kinabalu 2022 "Coming Back Stronger": A Review, 2024, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2024.23.7>

⁷ Creativity from Coexistence: How Phuket Inspires Harmony as a City of Gastronomy, Permanent Mission of Thailand to ASEAN, 2024.

⁸ See note 5.

TK and TCE for the better implementation of sustainable norms of life.

V. Policy Recommendations

- 1. Protecting and Promoting Culture as part of Sustainable Development:** Advocating the protection and promotion of culture as part of SDGs emphasising its cross-sectoral contributions and aligning with UNESCO's "Pact for the Future."
- 2. Scale Regional Initiatives like the ACHL:** Encouraging cross-border and joint cultural heritage projects between South and Southeast Asian partners through ACHL and likely organisations.
- 3. Invest in Cultural Economies:** Expanding support to MSMEs in the cultural sector through regional innovation hubs, digital platforms, and public-private partnerships to commercialise traditional crafts sustainably.
- 4. Leverage ASEAN-India Platforms:** Existing mechanisms like the ASEAN-India Cultural Exchange Programme can be used to promote cultural continuity, organise collaborative festivals, and launch joint research on shared heritage.
- 5. Development of an ASEAN-India Regional Cultural Index:** Creation of a monitoring tool to assess the cultural impact on development metrics. This index could inform policymaking, planning, and budget allocations for cultural sectors. Some of the suggested indicators could be contribution to GDP, employment generation, exports of cultural goods or services by the cultural

and creative industries; number of heritage sites protected, fund allocated to heritage protection in the domain of tangible and intangible heritage; number of visitors in the field of cultural tourism; cultural learning programmes in educational institutes by the industry and so on.

VI. Conclusion

As the world looks beyond 2030, culture must no longer be treated as peripheral to development. In Southeast Asia and India, where cultural heritage is an everyday reality, traditional knowledge and artistic expression are powerful vehicles for sustainability. Recognising and institutionalising this potential through policies, platforms like ACHL, and international cooperation India and ASEAN will be able to ensure that culture plays a central role in shaping a more inclusive, resilient, and people-centric future for the region.

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Core IV-B, Fourth Floor
India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003, India.
Tel. 91-11-24682177-80
Fax: 91-11-24682173-74-75
Email: dgoffice@ris.org.in
Website: www.ris.org.in