



Branding or sharing? The dialectics of labeling and cooperation in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network



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ABSTRACT

This article presents the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) and illustrates the theoretical and practical reasons underpinning its creation, based on the assumption that culture should be a strong component of effective development strategies. It then describes the effective functioning of the Network, and highlights two main tendencies resulting from diverse interpretations of what membership and participation should imply: on one side, the propensity to use the UCCN membership as a branding tool used in the framework of local communication strategies to attract investors and tourists; on the other side, the tendency to effectively work jointly with the cities of the network to build a stronger identity based of effective results through cooperation activities. The article underlines how the tendency to use the membership as classic branding tool has been so far very strong within the Network, and points out some implications and consequences of this trend. But it also underlines the existence of a strong trend towards more effective collaboration and joint implementation of activities. The article finally shows that an interaction between these two tendencies emerges. The possibility to reinforce the cities' image and brand through effective joint action and not self-referential communication is then highlighted, as a synthesis that use cooperation to build internationally acknowledged excellence.

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Introduction

52% of the world's population lives in the cities – in one generation, this will rise to two thirds (United Nations, 2012a). One billion people today live in urban slums – a datum which is also likely to increase dramatically, especially in case of further population growth, should the decline in fertility projected in some medium variant fail to be realized (United Nations, 2012c). Cities are motors of dynamism, growth, innovation and coexistence among communities, but also the places where most of the great critical challenges of humanity are concentrated. Every city is today confronted with

contradictory potentialities: decent housing versus slums, integration versus segregation, carbon-driven growth against green economy, and so on. Common models and approaches emerge as a result of similarities, globalization and knowledge sharing; however, given the great disparities existing within the same continent and same countries, every city should seek for specific solutions. Such solutions should take on board culture as a strategic ingredient of urban planning, as important as traditional components of economy, environment, sanitation, transportation, real estate, energy, and demography.

To face the critical emergence of cities as a necessary cooperation platform working for cultural diversity and sustainable urban development, the 170th Executive Board of UNESCO created in 2004 the Creative Cities Network (UCCN), following a proposal of the United Kingdom (Bandarin, 2012).

The network has been conceived from the very beginning as a tool for multi-stakeholders collaboration, and as

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an interactive process to bridge the possible isolation of the cities and their inhabitants with a view to building vision and action sharing. It was in other terms a response conform to the need, analyzed by Okano and Samson (2010) in their extensive overview of the literature on the question of cultural urban branding, to react against fragmentation through an expansion of the positioning of the four quadrants of public space, based on cosmopolitanism, in order to re-establish the creativity of cities. As we will see later, however, pushed by the examination of their own experience, the UCCN has progressively realized that the constitution of a network is not per se sufficient to fight fragmentation.

At the moment of its inception, the Creative Cities Network was also seen as an initiative of the “Global alliance for cultural diversity”, a platform created by UNESCO in 2002 to stimulate partnerships between private, public and civil society actors in order to strengthen cultural industries in developing countries and promote the diversity of cultural expressions.

This UCCN was launched as part of the numerous initiatives on cities and urban areas preservation and development pioneered by UNESCO, based on the assumption that cities serve not only as sites of preservation, but also as places wherein creative energies can be harnessed in the generation of socio-economically viable projects.

It should be reminded, in this context, that in 1972 UNESCO adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage whose World Heritage List includes to date 981 properties considered as having outstanding universal value. Many of those sites include urban elements. In 1994, the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) was created; it is made up of 250 cities in which are located sites included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2011 UNESCO adopted the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape designed to guide local governments in implementing a holistic approach to the sustainable development of historic cities, all while taking into account contemporary realities.

A tool of culture and development strategies

The theoretical assumption underpinning the creation of the UCCN as well of the other initiative of UNESCO mentioned above is the centrality of culture for sustainable development strategies, as indicated in its Medium Term Strategy for 2014–2021.²

Culture, conceived as the totality of spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional characteristic of a society or a group in the broadest sense, is a critical element when defining the constitutive foundations of well-being, dignity and sustainable human development, rooting them in local realities, perspectives and capabilities.

The intrinsic linkages between culture and development have been recognized since the 1960s, but only

afterwards their integration into international development policy documents has progressively become effective.

The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document adopted by the UN General Assembly recognized the contribution of all cultures to the enrichment of humankind. The Outcome Document of the Millennium Development Goals Summit (2010), two Resolutions by the UN General Assembly mentioning the role that culture plays in development resolutions (A/RES/65/166 in 2010, A/RES/66/208 in 2011 and A/RES/68/223 in 2013) and other international recommendations have underlined culture’s contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and called for culture to be mainstreamed into sustainable development policies.

The Outcome Document of the Rio + 20 Conference also included a number of significant references to culture and recognized that “all cultures and civilizations can contribute to sustainable development” (United Nations, 2012b, para. 41).

This text designs a vision for the post-2015 development agenda based on the three fundamental values of the respect for human rights, equality and sustainability and the four fundamental dimensions of inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability and peace and security. The document recognizes culture’s importance by stating that “communities and individuals must be able to create and practice their own culture and enjoy that of others free from fear. This requires, *inter alia*, respect for cultural diversity, safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, fostering cultural institutions, strengthening cultural and creative industries, and promoting cultural tourism.”

The same vision is embodied in the final declaration of International Congress “Culture: Key to Sustainable Development” (Hangzhou, China, 15–17 May 2013): in the face of mounting challenges such as population growth, urbanization, environmental degradation, disasters, climate change, increasing inequalities and persisting poverty, the declaration highlights an urgent need for new solutions that “fully acknowledge the role of culture as a system of values and a resource and framework to build truly sustainable development”.

Finally, the last edition of the Creative Economy Report (UNDP/UNESCO, 2013) presents – through a number of case studies – creativity and culture as drivers and enablers of sustainable development, fundamental for the pursuit of inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth and development” at the core of the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda.

Many attempts have been made to redefine urban spaces by using such terms as world cities, cultural cities, compact cities, creative cities, or endless cities (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002; Burdett & Sudjic, 2007). In the realm of urban governance, many cities have taken up “urban revitalization” as a theme of urban policy making and have begun various actions with the goal to become creative cities. Even if the concept of UNESCO Creative cities has not been created to adhere to a precise academic model, it corresponds to a well-defined theoretical framework based on the notion that culture is strategic for sustainable development.

² 37 C/4 - Medium Term Strategy 2014-2021, UNESCO, 2013. Page 11, paragraph (h). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002200/220031e.pdf>.

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