

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Following the path of culture

Colloque International "Culture et création, facteurs de développement"

Brussels, 3 April 2009

Speech

[Authorities in attendance]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to participate to the closing event of this Colloquium. For the past couple of days, you have been debating the contribution culture and the arts can give to development.

The issue is fascinating and certainly urgent regardless of the viewpoint one wants to adopt. The relation between culture and development depends on what is meant by 'development'.

Let us suppose that development were about output and disposable income. Even in this case, culture and the arts would already be an important factor.

Cinema, literature, and the performing arts—to name but three branches of the cultural sector—are legitimate industries in their own right and have important implications in terms of employment and value-added.

But this is a narrow idea; there is so much more to development than the generation of wealth. I prefer broader definitions, those that include personal and social factors as well.

I prefer these approaches because they better reflect the complexity of the human condition. There are many things that we value in our lives which have little to do with wealth.

To show you what I have in mind, I will borrow from the UN Human Development Index. The index includes—among other things—access to knowledge, health, security, leisure, freedom, and a sense of participation to the community.

Why am I recalling this list? Because artists and cultural operators can make a difference in many of these fields.

For instance, they can help government authorities produce the educational material that is used in schools; they can raise social and political issues; and—why not?—they can entertain us.

But perhaps the most important function of culture is its power to give people a sense of civic participation. Let me explain this point.

How do we know we belong to a community? This is not an easy question anywhere in the world, and it is especially difficult in many parts of the developing world.

What people need to imagine themselves as communities are cultural products that *represent them* as communities.

These products are not limited to high-brow works of art. I am not thinking of a new Dante, or Shakespeare, or Cervantes. We live in the age of popular culture. Today a singer or a movie star are more likely to help us come together as a community.

And here I want to remember Lucky Dube. There have been many socially responsible artists, but few have had his impact.

Let us just think of the wave of emotion that swept Africa and the world in October 2007 when the news spread that Lucky Dube had been killed in tragic and violent circumstances.

Why did so many people feel that his death touched them personally? Because artists and entertainers can articulate the most complex message in the simplest terms.

They can inspire us; they can talk directly to our hearts. This is how inspirational and committed artists help people acquire a sense of pride and self-respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am confident that your debates and the Brussels Declaration will open new prospects for cultural cooperation between the EU and ACP countries.

I also hope that the spirit of the Brussels Declaration will translate into more intense exchanges and cooperation *within* the ACP countries and regions.

The focus on the relevance of culture for development is consistent with the European Agenda for Culture, launched at the end of 2007.

In particular, the agenda states that culture should become a permanent feature of our international relations; a goal that is linked to the implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the diversity of cultural expressions.

The pace of ratification is unprecedented in UNESCO, although varying from one region to another. There are now 97 ratifications. While Europe and the ACP regions are at the forefront, there is still progress to be made in both regions.

Therefore, I call on all our partners to accede to the Convention and join us in our effort to give it true life and meaning.

To summarise, the EU intends to use its policies and its weight on the international scene to promote more balanced cultural exchanges between the North and the South and to promote cultural exchanges between different regions and countries in the South.

Despite the progress made in the past few years, culture is not acknowledged enough in country strategy papers and national indicative programmes.

There is no doubt in my mind that public policies on culture can have a large and positive impact in developing countries. But developing countries must do their part too.

I invite your governments to foster the emergence of local cultural industries and dynamic cultural sectors, and to incorporate cultural cooperation in their national and international strategies.

This Colloquium has made a good case for turning culture into a prominent element of any strategy for sustainable development.

Now that the path is open; it is up to us to follow it with well-designed policies, sufficient funding, and realistic actions.

Thank you.