

“Culture Counts: A Conference on
Financing,
Resources, and the Economics of
Culture in Sustainable Development”
Florence, Italy
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PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

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**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Florence, Italy
October 7, 1999**

Thank you very much, and I am delighted to be here at this very important conference. I would like to begin by thanking my good friend Jim Wolfensohn and the directorate of the World Bank for inviting me to be a part of this conference. I also want to applaud the Bank's commitment to culture and the way in which the Bank has included culture among the core areas to be addressed in the Comprehensive Development Framework.

Let me also thank Director-General Gianfranco Facco Bonetti and the government of Italy for hosting us here in Florence, a city that is truly a cultural capital of the world and one that draws millions and millions of visitors because of the treasures that are so well displayed here. I also thank the government of Italy and the government of the City of Florence for supporting this conference.

I know you have already had three productive days talking about the importance of culture in sustainable development. You have been discussing ways in which financing and resources can be made more available for culture. There are many important points in this discussion that bear attention and that I hope will serve as the basis for further conversations among cultural ministers and representative, but also joining with economic and finance ministers and social ministers as well. I further hope that the conference creates the kind of public and private dialogue that is important for the furtherance of the appreciation of culture in the lives of individuals and societies around the globe.

I would not take your time in repeating the issues that you have already discussed and about which you have so much expertise. But I would like to speak to you as someone who has been privileged to travel widely, to see some of the world's most priceless cultural treasures and traditions, and to listen to the challenges and hopes of families – and especially to hear the voices of women and children – who are struggling to build better lives for themselves. I would like to add just a few modest strategies and suggestions for supporting cultural development to ones you have already discussed.

Over the past seven years, I have represented the United States on nearly every continent but for Antarctica, and I have met hundreds – indeed thousands – of men, women and children who have talked to me and shown me with pride their homes, their crafts, their treasures, their museums, their institutions, and the fabric that makes up their lives. Like many of you, I have seen some of those treasures that are known throughout the world. I have walked along the reflecting pool of the Taj Mahal. I have seen with my own eyes the Door of No Return on Goree Island in Senegal. In both those places one could not help but be provoked to think: in the first, about the enduring love that was shining in those shimmering waters, and in the other, the doorway that led so many of my fellow countrymen on their horrifying journey to slavery. Each

of those instances was a provocative moment, and there have been many others, whether it is sitting in one of the great cathedrals of Europe and watching the sun stream through the stained glass or standing in awe before one of the artistic treasures in this city.

It is at those moments that I believe many of us are overcome by the richness, the diversity, and the legacy of the human experience. Each of these monuments has sprung from the mind and muscle of our forebears. And each has the power to take us back to civilizations in the recent or distant past. As we look at places that are so well known to us, we also have to see those smaller, quieter places where culture is living today. From the Great Wall of China to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, you can see how culture is being lived out on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis. But you could also see how young people look so similar today, dressed very much the same in brand-name t-shirts, eating the same brand-name hamburgers, finding their dialogue and their imaginations fired by the same kinds of TV and movie characters, evidence of the globalization of popular culture in our time.

When I think then, of globalized popular culture juxtaposed against some of the world's most unique cultural treasures, I am particularly reminded of the urgency that we must give to preserve and nurture culture in sustainable development in what often appears to be a throw-away world.

Globalization in itself is neither good nor bad. Technological progress, the Internet, faxes, satellites, jet travel have indeed brought our world closer together. And more than at any other time in human history, the world has the knowledge, the skills, and the wealth to empower people – especially those living in the developing world – with the choices and opportunities to live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

But we have also seen first-hand how globalization and development can threaten cherished traditions and cultures, how globalization can create consumers, but not citizens. We know from the newspaper headlines stories of in-laws burning brides because their dowries failed to yield color TV sets, or of poor people in every region of the world spending hard-earned money on products they think represent modern culture.

President Havel of the Czech Republic has spoken and written at length about globalization and the homogenization of our desires and tastes. He argues that now, though, there is already a rebellion against globalization. He sees, as I see, the desires of so many to assert their identity against mass culture fueled by globalization. In his words, "Many of the great problems we face today... have their origin in the fact of this global civilization, which is no more than a thin veneer over the sum of human awareness." Beneath that thin veneer, people are striving for identity and feeling a great need to set themselves apart from one another. Cultures and peoples who feel they have been marginalized by globalization are demanding to be heard, and some are even taking drastic steps to be so heard. We have seen some of the worst evidence of this in wars and ethnic cleansing, in the threats and terrorism of religious fundamentalists.

That is why in this era of globalization this conference is so timely, because it is essential that we respect the diversity of cultures and that we give all people the opportunities to preserve

and practice their traditions. And that is why whenever we consider strategies for economic and social development around the world, we must not forget the importance of culture.

Now, I would imagine that there are many in the countries from where all of you came, and others who are observing this conference, who might wonder why so many people committed to tackling the "hard" issue of alleviating poverty – people committed to bringing education and health care and water purification and sanitation and transportation and communication to disadvantaged communities – might gather here in Florence to discuss what still too many believe is a luxury, that of culture and the role of culture in development, where the restoration of historic areas and monuments can attract tourism and the revitalization of traditional crafts can attract business and investment. It counts for social development, because we have learned over and over again that we cannot improve the quality of life without improving the soul of life. And culture is the soul of life. It is what gives us roots, gives our lives meaning, it is what binds us to each other.

The American writer William Faulkner once said, "The past is never dead. It is no even past." Not only the blood, but the experiences and hopes of our ancestors course through our veins. And only through their languages and legends, through their still-existing monuments and still-living traditions, can we understand who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be.

Just think of what happened in the ten years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, as people have discovered their long-suppressed culture and felt compelled to express it in many diverse ways. Just a few days ago in Warsaw, I visited the Lauder School, where scores of children were studying Hebrew and Jewish traditions in a place where it was thought that would never occur again.

Four years ago, in Mongolia, I met children who in the days of Communism had never been permitted to read about their great ancestor, Ghengis Khan, or to find materials for school in their native language. In those two places, very far from one another, Warsaw and Ulan Bator, I saw children – children expressing themselves and looking for ways to connect their present with their past. As I listened to the children sing a traditional song in Warsaw, I thought how extraordinary it was that they would now be able to worship and speak their own language, to honor the ways of the ways of their ancestors without fear. When I returned from Mongolia after hearing the stories of the young Mongolian children who could not even imagine their past because there was no written material or other text to provide that guidance to them, I worked with their government to procure Mongolian-language textbooks so that those children, too, would have the right to express and understand their culture and history.

Throughout our century, we have seen the waste and tragedy that can occur when we take a culturally illiterate approach to development. How many health clinics that have been funded by the World Bank or UNESCO or UNICEF or governments have failed because they could not serve the communities that desperately needed them because aid workers failed to respect local mores and customs? How many tons of farm machinery have been left rusting in the fields because donors never asked the farmers whether they wanted the equipment in the first place?

How many roads to nowhere sit abandoned in the countryside because local residents had not been consulted on the placement of such roads?

For the sake of progress we have uprooted tens of thousands from ancestral villages and transferred them into high-rise apartments that offered modern amenities but attracted crime and alienated residents. For the sake of progress we have knocked down historic buildings and replaced them with parking lots. For the sake of progress we have built roads through the countryside and destroyed centuries-old, time-tested methods of irrigation.

That is why we must bring a new cultural literacy and cultural respect to all of development strategies – from health care to education to safe shelter to sanitation and clean water to transportation and agriculture. Cultural respect and preservation must become indelibly linked to progress and development. The World Bank – and so many of you who represent foundations and governments – have helped lead the way, both by making sure that development projects reflect the lives and traditions of the people they serve, and by investing in culture for its own sake:

Let me mention one particular strategy that I have seen first-hand in the last year. Last spring, in Cairo, I visited a medieval neighborhood that was coming back to life because of efforts to restore a twelfth-century mosque and other historic buildings. The corrosive effects of time, pollution, and rising groundwater had begun to destroy the structures. And like so many other urban centers struggling with rapid population growth, living and health conditions had deteriorated. The renovations were, however, spurring the increased development of other buildings and attracting more tourists and business back to the community. The work that was done there was both culturally literate and sensitive, and I was pleased that the U.S. government, through USAID, was supporting this and similar efforts in Morocco and India and China.

For the first time in the history of humankind, more people are living in cities than in countryside. And as urban populations continue to grow, projects to restore and re-purpose historic structures and to upgrade sanitation and infrastructure can be essential to ensuring the continuity and strength of communities. Through such projects an entire neighborhood can be mobilized and empowered to rehabilitate historic traditions and at the same time to solve problems such as those caused by rising groundwater. Traditional craftsmen can find new employment and businesses can prosper from well-managed tourism.

In addition to all the recommendations you have made for “Creating Capacities for Sustainable Development,” let me add just two more:

First I believe it is important to support more museums and cultural institutions in the developing world, places where cultures are most threatened by globalization. I often think of a struggling museum I visited in Africa. There was only one air-conditioned room in this beautiful old building that had been turned into the national museum. And in that one air-conditioned room, in a closet full of cardboard boxes, were kept some of the most precious artifacts of our human history. The museum guide took out the boxes one by one and opened them, and inside, wrapped in thin cotton, were human skulls more than a million years old. I think of those skulls

– some of the most priceless artifacts of humanity – stored in those flimsy boxes, and wonder how many more irreplaceable objects are at risk of disintegration and destruction. We must do more to help these nations and their governments restore their treasures, store them safely, and display them appropriately. The answer is not to remove them from their countries of origin, but to keep them close to the people, where they belong, by offering appropriate aid.

That is why I was very excited to hear about an innovative idea called the “Culture Bank.” With the help of Peace Corps volunteers and a few international NGOs, the people of a village in Northern Mali have found an ingenious way to keep their local treasures in the community and to promote business development at the same time. They have started a “Culture Bank” that offers small loans to people who agree to lend an object of historic value to the community museum as collateral. That way, families who need money for seeds for harvest or another goat to milk or whatever other business venture they are engaged in for their daily income are not tempted to sell their treasures to tourists who will take them out of the villages. So far, the bank has had a 100 percent repayment rate, and a new respect for cultural traditions has taken root in the community. We must find more innovative ways like these to link cultural development to economic development.

My second proposal is also very simple. I believe we should call on our children’s potential to serve as leaders in cultural preservation. I would urge that we support more efforts such as the Adopt-a-Monument program that I have seen both here in Italy – in Naples and in Palermo. As many of you may know, it is a program that encourages schoolchildren to choose a historic monument and take responsibility for its care. In both Palermo and Naples, I saw how children had worked hard to revive centuries-old churches in their communities that had been left to deteriorate. They studied history, they developed guided tours, they picked up garbage, and they raised funds for renovation. At each site, I was surrounded by children eager to tell me the story of their church. I could hear the pride in their voices as they recounted the historic events that had take place within those walls.

I have heard and witnessed similar delight in the voices and eyes of children in my own country. Two years ago, the President and I created a White House Millennium Council to lead us in a celebration of the coming millennium by helping all of our citizens to “honor the past and imagine the future.” I have traveled around my country bringing attention to historic sites, encouraging local communities to come together to Save America’s Treasures. That includes not only great works of art and historic building and natural landscapes, but what may be found in every community or even in the attics of many homes in my country. I remember visiting Hispanic children in New Mexico who had banded together to study the history of a local statue called the Southwest Pieta. They performed a play in both English and Spanish to explain the legend of this statue.

The enthusiasm that children can show for cultural preservation is also evident in a new effort in the United States called Pennies-for-Preservation. School children are raising, literally pennies to save historic places such as the home of Harriet Tubman, the famous ex-slave who in the nineteenth century became a leading abolitionist who led other slaves to safety and freedom. Though their contributions were modest, their interest in the fate of this historic place was priceless.

Each of the children I met from Adopt-a-monument or Southwest Pieta or Pennies-for-Preservation also have gained a new appreciation for the rich cultural legacy of their ancestors and therefore are likely to show more respect for the culture in which they live.

There is no reason why these efforts cannot be transplanted, especially to children living in countries struggling to preserve their cultural treasures. Anyone who has ever seen the concentration a child can bring to a hobby or a sports event or to a story that is being told knows that children have a tremendous capacity for soaking up knowledge and history. They are innate curators and preservationists.

So why not, in this age of globalization, remind them early of their unique and diverse heritages and help them learn to take responsibility for preservation? Teach them to respect culture and recognize the stake they have in its preservation and maintenance for future generations. If we do work with such children we may also see other results flowing from these efforts.

I have met so-called "at risk" children – those at risk of dropping out of school or becoming violent or criminals. And with those young children we have seen time and time again that if given the opportunity to participate in the arts and culture, they often bloom. Studies have shown that arts programs, more than any other, are most effective in bringing out the intellectual and creative potentials of at-risk children and keeping them out of trouble. Each year at the White House, we give out the "Coming Up Taller Awards" to recognize model programs, and I've been told countless times by young men and women that if it had not been for their writing or arts or performance or dance classes, they would be on the streets or in jail. These children know what you know: Culture counts.

In a mere 85 days, we will be celebrating the dawn of a new millennium. As we look back at these past 1,000 years, we can see that as a people we have made much progress. We have cured disease though incurable and managed to lengthen and improve the quality of life. We have circled the earth in every imaginable way – boats and planes and even balloons. We have seen the effects of space shuttles and fiber-optic cables as they have stretched our imagination and brought us closer together.

But nothing has changed what we might very well call the values that define us most, values that exist between the economy and the government, values that really lie in the middle between our economic and our governmental activity and that make our life worth living – our family and our faiths, our work and freedom, our creative expression and knowledge, our associations. In other words, our culture. So if we want to see the 21st Century be as rich as it can be, and if we hope that our children will respect their own cultures and the cultures of others, then we have to make culture count. And we have to link culture to economic and social development. And by doing so, we will make a statement that is a statement of values about who we are as a people and what kind of future we think we can make together.

Thank you for thinking through these issues and for ensuring that culture counts in the future.