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**Swiss Agency for Development  
and Cooperation SDC**

# THEMATIC GUIDANCE ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT



May 2024

This thematic guidance replaces the SDC's cultural policy of 2016 and sets out the SDC's future cultural mandate in a very concise format. The guidance still includes the 'cultural percentage' in partner countries (each SDC representation invests at least 1% of its budget in arts and culture<sup>1</sup>) and the partnerships with cultural institutions in Switzerland, whose platforms enable artists from partner countries to access the cultural market, further education and the public in order to strengthen the cultural sectors in their countries of origin. The guidance is now structured along the lines of the four functions of thematic cooperation (programmes/partnerships, multilateral dialogue, advisory services and knowledge management) and highlights the future orientation and contribution of culture to peace, conflict prevention, social cohesion, governance/democracy and gender equality. The portfolio of partnerships in Switzerland has been significantly streamlined and now focuses on film: by 2028, just five of 12 cultural partners will remain, the budget will be reduced by 45% and human resources by 30%.

## INTRODUCTION

The promotion and protection of cultural diversity is particularly pronounced in Switzerland and are stated aims in the relevant article of the Federal Constitution. The Federal Act of 1976 on International Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid aims to “promote the development of people and enable them to help shape their economic, social and cultural development within their own society”. The SDC has been promoting culture and development and supporting cultural sectors in its partner countries since the 1980s. In doing so, it also fulfils Switzerland’s obligations under the ratified UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005. The Swiss Position on a Framework for Sustainable Development Post-2015 states that “promoting cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue [...] supports the inclusion of marginalised groups. It is also important for fostering peace and for sustainable development as a whole.”<sup>2</sup>. Art and culture are part of the Federal Council’s International Cooperation Strategy 2025–28 and contribute to achieving various targets of the 2030 Agenda, which is based on a more holistic approach to sustainable development.

In contrast to the Federal Department of Home Affairs, the cantons and municipalities, the SDC’s mandate does not include any cultural promotion in favour of Swiss artists, but rather it promotes art and creative expression and thus the local cultural sectors and actors in the partner countries. In addition to strengthening human rights, SDC cultural activities contribute to the promotion of democracy, gender equality, social cohesion, conflict prevention and peace. The thematic guidance explains the many links between culture and these themes and shows how they can be integrated into the SDC’s activities.

## OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE OF THE SDC’S CULTURAL MANDATE

**The SDC’s cultural mandate** aims to strengthen independent, diverse and participatory cultural sectors<sup>3</sup> in partner countries that make an important contribution to sustainable development, democratic participation, conflict prevention and peace.

### **The activities:**

- › promote integration and social cohesion, cultural diversity, the diversity of social narratives, intercultural dialogue and equal opportunities;
- › strengthen civil society and its participation in cultural life and in social and political processes;
- › contribute to the prevention of violence and conflict, and help people to deal with the past and achieve individual and social stability after conflicts;
- › promote the emergence of new ideas for a creative approach to existing challenges and strengthen confidence, creativity and the ability to innovate;
- › protect human rights, in particular freedom of expression, and create spaces for democratic discourse and pluralistic societies.
- › promote the economic potential of cultural sectors.

**The SDC’s approach is based on the following rationale:**

### **Cultural diversity as a heritage of humanity**

Cultural diversity is just as important to humanity as biodiversity is to nature, in that it creates more choices. The lack of recognition of a minority, a language or a religious custom can trigger tensions and conflicts. These challenges call for public policy at national and international level that protects cultural rights.

### **Culture to promote dialogue and exchange and as a basis for sustainable peace**

Art and culture promote the exchange of ideas and open debate about differences, thereby making a significant contribution to mutual understanding, tolerance and trust. Dialogue between religious and ethnic groups or political opponents is the foundation of peaceful relations between individuals, communities and states. Development cooperation also promotes this intercultural exchange and dialogue as a contribution to conflict prevention and peace.

### **Culture as a space for democratic participation and the promotion of social cohesion**

In times of increasing authoritarianism and shrinking space for freedom of expression and assembly, support for cultural actors and spaces is an important counterweight that bolsters diversity of narratives and opinions. It provides people from different cultural backgrounds with an inclusive space for dialogue and democratic participation in which they can interact peacefully and creatively. This helps to build trust and social cohesion.

### **Artistic expression as a driver of change**

Art is an integral part of a culture and one of its forms of expression. At the same time, it adopts a position outside of this culture by questioning culturally established practices. Artistic expression has always offered people and societies the opportunity to adopt different perspectives and question their own viewpoints. Art makes it possible to deal with sensitive issues and to question social and cultural norms. This creates space for diversity of opinion, reflection, self-criticism and social transformation.

### **Culture as a human right and as a resource**

In its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs<sup>4</sup>. Cultural rights, which are enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, include access to the cultural life of one's choice and are indispensable for human dignity and the free development of the personality.

### **Art and creativity as an economic factor**

Today, in the wake of the covid pandemic, the cultural and creative industries are once again considered to be particularly fast-growing and resilient at local, national and global levels in both industrialised and developing countries<sup>5</sup>. In 2023, the sector accounted for 6.1% of the global economy, generating global revenues of USD 2'250 billion, providing employment for almost 30 million people and employing more 15–29-year-olds than any other sector<sup>6</sup>. Investing in culture and creativity has proven to be a means of revitalising the economy and creating jobs in cities, which are home to a growing proportion of the world's population. These investments give a boost to innovation, especially among young people.

### **Promoting culture to address challenges in partner countries**

In order to strengthen their cultural sectors, partner countries often lack markets, an effective legal framework for the protection of intellectual property and sufficiently funded cultural policies that promote diversity. Freelance artists cannot finance their training and have hardly any means to realise and disseminate their work. A lack of exhibition and performance venues restricts the population's participation in cultural life, especially outside the capital cities. All of this also has an impact at the international level: due to the obstacles to mobility, artists and their productions have only limited access to international markets and networks.

Specifically, **SDC cultural activities (1)** are designed to enable cultural practitioners from partner countries<sup>7</sup> to train and develop their skills, expand their activities and networks and gain respect for their rights, recognition for their work and improved framework conditions; **(2)** promote artistic expression and cultural creation, support the dissemination of works and encourage the emergence of spaces for reflection and dialogue – while respecting the artistic freedom of partners; **(3)** promote access and participation of the population in cultural and artistic life in partner countries, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas; and **(4)** facilitate access for artists and cultural practitioners and their productions to the public, the market and professional networks in Switzerland and internationally.

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDC'S CULTURAL MANDATE

The SDC implements its commitment to culture through the four functions of thematic cooperation: 1) cultural programmes in the partner countries, 2) partnerships with cultural institutions, 3) multilateral dialogue and 4) advisory services and knowledge management.

## Cultural programmes in partner countries

The SDC allocates at least 1% of its budget in its partner countries to local arts and culture initiatives of all art forms through specific projects or programmes (SDC 'cultural percentage'). This applies to the SDC's geographical divisions and its offices in the field. This decentralisation allows funding priorities to be set according to context, needs and local possibilities. The SDC seeks dialogue with other public and private donors and coordinates funding mechanisms in order to reduce transaction costs for cultural organisations. It works according to the following principles:

### Long-term commitment

The SDC focuses less on one-off projects and more on multi-year programmes that achieve sustainable and systemic results for the local cultural sectors, influence the framework conditions (laws, protection of copyright, state promotion of culture, etc.) for cultural work and achieve progress in the areas of democracy and peace.

### Respect for artistic freedom and freedom of expression

The SDC ensures that the artistic freedom and freedom of expression of its partner institutions and artists are respected. It maintains relationships based on trust with partner institutions with similar values. However, as stated in the agreed anti-discrimination clause of every contract, the SDC explicitly does not support extreme positions that could prove offensive or harmful.

### Prioritising support for civil society activities

The SDC supports the work of civil society organisations and at the same time cooperates with public authorities and institutions to improve the framework conditions for creative artists (cultural policies of partner countries).

## Promoting fair and decentralised access to cultural life

The SDC promotes access to cultural life and artistic expression for rural and disadvantaged population groups and supports exchanges between urban centres and rural areas. It advocates for the inclusion of young people, intergenerational exchange and the equal participation of women and men.

## Conflict-sensitive management of cultural projects

The SDC adopts a conflict-sensitive approach in order to avoid deepening social divisions or exacerbating polarisation.

## Partnerships with cultural institutions

The SDC promotes artists and productions from its partner countries through professional cultural organisations that have the appropriate expertise, networks and international reach and offer platforms through which artists can gain access to Swiss and international markets. The overriding objective remains the promotion of the cultural sectors in the partner countries. Through the skills and networks they are able to acquire and build on, the increased exposure they get from participation in festivals, and the fees and cash prizes they earn, artists are able to strengthen the cultural sectors in their countries. The SDC supports activities in all language regions, taking into account urban and rural areas and the following:

### Respect for artistic freedom

The SDC gives artists the freedom they need to ensure the quality and credibility of their work. However, these activities must not harm Switzerland's image and must be in keeping with Swiss foreign policy.

### Focus on film

In its partnerships with Swiss cultural institutions, the SDC prioritises film promotion (but not as part of the 'cultural percentage'), as film is an excellent, easily accessible and easy to distribute format that stimulates reflection and debate. In the film sector, the number of Swiss cultural organisations with an international reach is very high. There are also ideal opportunities for synergies between cultural partners in Switzerland and SDC activities in partner countries.

### **Support for artists from countries with greater needs**

To ensure the coherence of its activities, the SDC gives priority to promoting creative artists from its partner countries with whom it fosters synergies with local cultural programmes. In addition, support is provided to artists from countries that the OECD considers to be among the lowest-income regions. Experience shows that the cultural sectors in these countries do not have access to funding.

### **Multilateral dialogue**

At the multilateral level, the SDC advocates with the UN General Assembly, the UN Economic and Social Council and UNESCO for art and culture to be given a higher status in the international development architecture and an independent goal in the future SDGs (post-2030). At the same time, the SDC is in dialogue with the UN special rapporteur in the field of cultural rights in order to ensure she adds the links to democracy, conflict prevention and peace to her agenda. In all discussions and resolution negotiations, the SDC emphasises the importance of art and culture for social cohesion, democratic participation, conflict prevention and peace.

### **Advisory services and knowledge management**

The SDC promotes and supports cross-sectoral exchange and the utilisation of knowledge on the links between culture and development, democracy, gender equality, social cohesion, conflict prevention and peace. It advises and connects employees from the external network and head office, and promotes mutual learning. In terms of quality assurance, it reflects experiences in the implementation and impact measurement of cultural programmes with proven principles of cultural promotion in partner countries. The SDC also coordinates its activities in the field of culture with other federal offices, in particular with the Federal Office of Culture.

## ENDNOTES

1. The budgetary discussions on the IC Strategy 2025-2028, which are ongoing at the time of the writing of the Guidance, may have an impact on the design of the 'cultural percentage'
2. Swiss Position on a Framework for Sustainable Development Post-2015, adopted by the Federal Council on 25 June 2014.
3. The cultural and creative sector includes all activities based on cultural values and/or artistic expression, irrespective of the market orientation or the nature and funding of the entity carrying them out. These activities include the development, creation, production, dissemination and preservation of cultural goods and services representing cultural, artistic or other types of creative expression, as well as related functions such as training or management. The cultural and creative sector encompasses architecture, archives, libraries and museums, arts and crafts, the audiovisual sector (film, television, video games and multimedia), tangible and intangible cultural heritage, design, festivals, music, literature, performing arts, publishing, radio and the visual arts (based on European Parliament definition – Creative Europe Programme Regulation 2021–27).
4. Definition according to the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982). This UNESCO definition is also used by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC) in its strategy for the promotion of culture in 2025–28.
5. OECD/LEED: The Culture Fix. Creative People, Places and Industries (2022)
6. UNESCO May 2023: 'Promoting the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and Creative Economy'
7. Partner countries' refers to those countries that are eligible for support as part of official development cooperation (OECD/DAC country list). In line with its mandate, the SDC concentrates on the poorest countries (low income/lower middle-income countries). All countries in which the SDC is implementing a programme are also included, in order to exploit possible synergies in terms of sustainable development.

# IMPRINT

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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)  
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC  
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[www.sdc.admin.ch](http://www.sdc.admin.ch)

## **Design**

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## **Cover photography**

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## **Specialist contact**

Peace, Governance and Equality Section – Culture and Development  
[deza-pge@eda.admin.ch](mailto:deza-pge@eda.admin.ch)

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