
The Interparliamentary Conference on the Diversity of Cultural Expression

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Forums and parliamentary associations exercise a growing influence on the international scene, as demonstrated by the "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions" under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie were among the first to demand, as early as the year 2000, an international legal instrument dedicated to promoting dialogue among cultures, an initiative that led to the adoption of the Convention on October 20, 2005. With this in mind the APF and the National Assembly of Québec jointly organized the Interparliamentary Conference on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (CIDE), which was held on February 2-3, 2011 in Québec City, with the support of the International Organization of La Francophonie and the collaboration of UNESCO. This Conference brought together some two hundred and fifty participants, parliamentarians from the French-speaking world, experts from the cultural sectors and observers hailing from interparliamentary organizations and civil society.



In 2010, after a ten-year period marked by constant support for the diversity of cultural expressions, the parliamentarians of the French-speaking world wished to take the necessary measures to meet the new challenges arising from the implementation of the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* and to make their contribution to this new stage in the deployment and consolidation of cultural sectors within their respective societies.

The Conference in Québec City was opened by the Secretary General of La Francophonie, Abdou Diouf, the Premier of Québec, Jean Charest, the Mayor of Québec City, Régis Labeaume, the delegate of the

Director General of UNESCO, Galia Saouma-Forero, and myself. It aimed to outline the new perimeters of the parliamentary community's commitment to the diversity of cultural expressions as well as to deeply seat this commitment amidst the existing issues relating to the implementation of the Convention.

The Convention

The foremost aim of this international legal instrument is to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions as materialized and put forth by cultural activities, goods and services. Furthermore, its intent is to establish a legal framework that is conducive to the creation, production, distribution, dissemination as well as access and enjoyment of a great variety of cultural expressions from diverse origins. The UNESCO Convention emphasizes the decisive role of cultural policies and defines the rights and obligations of the Parties in respect of the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, at both the national and international levels. Its implementation constitutes a major step in the emergence of dynamic cultural sectors. The Convention entered into force on March 18, 2007, three months after the tabling of the thirtieth ratification instrument. To date, 117 Parties have ratified this treaty.

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UNESCO describes “cultural expressions” as the various creative forms expressed by individuals and social groups. They include, among other things, expressions by words (literature, folktales...), sound (music), images (photographs, movies) on any type of medium (printed, audiovisual, digital, etc.) or alternatively by action (dance, theatre) or objects (sculptures, paintings).

These cultural expressions are now more than ever subject to an industrial and economic logic as regards their production and outreach. Hence, we can ascertain that a large part of cultural expressions are conveyed by “cultural activities, goods and services”, which are now privileged channels of culture. They have thus gained major economic importance and have become international trade issues. Accordingly, the dual economic and cultural nature of cultural activities, goods and services has progressively been recognized, just as the fact that, as they conduce to identity, values and meaning, they cannot be treated as simple commercial products.

Objectives and Conduct of the Conference

The first objective of the Conference was to make an assessment of the implementation of the Convention. It appears that, five years after the adoption of this extraordinary lever, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done and that we, parliamentarians, have an obligation to make every effort in order that our governments may carry out their responsibilities.

To accomplish this, it is essential that we closely examine the policies and statutes relating to the cultural sector that have been pursued by our governments. We must identify the existing statutes, policies and programmes, we must examine them, make an assessment thereof, and participate in their implementation or reinforcement. Moreover, we can draw inspiration from our respective experiences and practices in cultural matters in order to promote the adoption of legislative and regulatory tools that will foster the emergence and support the consolidation of cultural sectors in all States.

Hence, beyond making an assessment, the Conference aimed to create true momentum for the launching of this essential parliamentary activity as well as to base it on a firm conceptual foundation and common goals. Accordingly, both Conference days focussed on some of the priority aspects surrounding the implementation of the Convention, on which speakers of international repute hailing from South Africa, Spain, Serbia, France, Senegal, Belgium, Morocco and Québec, and from

various political, cultural and academic backgrounds, spoke and debated.

The first day of proceedings, which involved UNESCO and the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), focussed, on the one hand, on the presentation of the operational guidelines for the implementation and application of the provisions of the Convention that have to date been adopted by the Conference of Parties, as well as on the strategies aiming to promote the ratification and visibility of the Convention.

On the other hand, participants engaged in a reflection on the priority issues: the necessary integration of the cultural aspect into the implementation of sustainable development and the importance of taking measures now to transpose international law into a national legislative framework to promote the diversity of cultural expressions. To support and give concrete expression to this reflection, participants had access to documentation prepared for the occasion by Bernard Boucher, Associate Professor at Senghor University in Alexandria, providing an overview of the cultural policies within the States and governments of the Francophonie as well as the main components of a cultural policy.

In the course of the second day, which involved the International Organization of La Francophonie, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Société de développement des entreprises culturelles du Québec, discussions centered on the various methods that can be used, both from regulatory and legislative standpoints as well as regarding State assistance, to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions. To this end, two concrete examples of good practices in protecting and promoting certain cultural sectors (music and variety, fine crafts, books, movies and television) were presented.

Participants had the opportunity to become better acquainted with the OIF's cooperation activities in support of cultural industries, and with the operation of certain public agencies whose mission is to support cultural creation and industries.

The Québec City Declaration

These two days of proceedings ended with the signing of the *Québec City Declaration on the*

Commitment of La Francophonie Parliamentarians to Implement the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, an affirmation of strong and unwavering support to the Convention. This text, which is available on the CIDECA website (www.cidecquebec2011.org), comprises an array of concrete commitments and sets the stage for a resolutely pragmatic approach.

Among the highlights of the *Québec City Declaration*, APF members undertake to adopt legal texts that will promote the diversity of cultural expressions, as well as to monitor trade negotiations that affect the field of culture. They also direct the APF's Committee on Education, Communication and Cultural Affairs to elaborate, on the basis of these commitments, an action plan to promote this Convention in the French-speaking world and to foster its practical application.

Moreover, the Parliamentary Assembly of La Francophonie call upon heads of State and government to use the full weight of the Convention in trade negotiations to defend their right to adopt or maintain policies and measures that support and promote cultural expressions. They also ask them to actively uphold development cooperation in order to grant preferential status to cultural artists, professionals, and agents as well as to cultural goods and services in developing countries, and to make annual contributions to the International Fund for Cultural Diversity equal to 1% of their contributions to the organization.

Finally, the APF members request that the International Organization of La Francophonie inventory, study and evaluate the cultural policies and programmes implemented by its member States and governments in order to create a platform for sharing expertise and experience in cultural matters within the French-speaking world.

In relation to these various commitments, it is clear that the CIDECA represents a turning point with respect to the involvement of the Francophonie parliamentarians in the diversity of cultural expressions, since it has provided the opportunity to redefine its objectives and give it new impetus.

For Greater Involvement of Parliamentarians

The Francophonie parliamentarians are today more determined than ever to maintain their mobilization for the diversity of cultural expressions on the international scene. With the reflections undertaken within the framework of the CIDECA and henceforth

well equipped to face the challenges arising from the implementation stage of the Convention, we will evidently continue to closely monitor the proceedings of the organs of the Convention.

However, our responsibility goes beyond simply monitoring. Throughout the conference, the fundamental role of parliamentarians in the implementation of the Convention was on several occasions brought to the forefront. It was repeatedly stated that the implementation of cultural policies was not an abstract concept, but that it required budgets, legislative and regulatory provisions that concern numerous departments. It is imperative that parliamentarians take on a leading role in the matter and ensure that their executives follow up on the commitments made in the Convention.

As parliamentarians, we can, become true ambassadors of the Convention to our governments and initiate various legislative procedures for the application of the Convention in national policies and, more specifically, the adequate financing of our cultural sectors.

Our role is also one of raising the awareness of States that have not yet ratified the Convention. It was indeed repeated several times during the CIDECA proceedings that it was imperative to continue efforts toward increasing the number of ratifications, so as to strengthen the legal weight of the Convention and to make it a key instrument of international law.

The parliamentary associations and forums in which we take part allow us to play this role. They constitute true platforms for reflection and sharing of expertise and good practices in cultural matters, within which strategic actions to increase the number of ratifications can be developed, and from which an influential parliamentary will can extend to the national executive powers and encourage new ratifications.

I hope that the enthusiasm and political determination expressed during the recent proceedings will impact international mobilization as regards the Convention, spurring new interest for the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.