The 'cultural economy' of Mauritius: tensions and contradictions in the implementation of the UNESCO convention

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The UNESCO mission to Mauritius responded to the Government of Mauritius’ expectation to develop a strategy for cultural industries. This was to be based on the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005. This paper will consider the differing interpretations of the role of culture in development in the country between government and civil society and the expectations of the UNESCO experts. The role of the media in highlighting these different interpretations will also be considered and how the presence of the UNESCO experts began to frame the public debate about cultural industries, the role of culture, traditional versus contemporary culture and what is meant by the ‘cultural economy’. The meaning of ‘cultural economy’ versus that of ‘cultural or creative industries’ is considered in relation to its more appropriate application for sustainability development. The paper asks whether the UNESCO mission made evident new social divisions and ruptures in the cultural matrix in a context where the creativity and innovation of contemporary cultural expressions is considered a threat to traditional cultural expressions. Finally, the paper explores the important role of independent and critical arts organisation in civil society – supported by the presence and activities of the UNESCO experts – in moving the debates in contemporary Mauritian society forward.

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