Cultural diversity and sustainable development: potential and limitations

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The UNESCO 2005 Convention on the promotion and protection of the diversity of cultural expressions provides an explicit link between the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions and sustainable development in Article 13 and development cooperation in Articles 14-18. However, the Convention leaves out broader notions of cultural diversity, which include culture as a way of life and cultural rights. Therefore, we argue, that the reductionist understanding of culture does not necessarily or intrinsically have the potential for sustainable development that is claimed in the Convention. As a result, the link between the diversity of cultural expressions and sustainability has limited potential for transformative action towards sustainable development. The Convention provides visibility for the link between cultural diversity and sustainable development, but does not have the breadth to deal with sustainability in a transformative way and with cultural diversity beyond cultural expressions. While the Convention provides a framework that allows for transformative shifts towards sustainable development, decisive action in this regard remains voluntary and dependent on the willingness of parties to read these elements in the text.

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