



LESSON TRANSCRIPT

Eight cultural rights to examine in our practices

By Anne Aubry

The 2007 Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights is an invaluable document for clarifying what cultural rights are. It helps us to work on them, and to look at how they can be translated and interpreted in practice. That's what we do at Réseau Culture 21.

Article 2 of the Fribourg Declaration defines culture. Everything starts from this anthropological definition of culture. It says that the term culture covers the values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, traditions, institutions and ways of life through which a person or a group expresses their humanity and the meaning they give to their existence and development.

This definition of culture is central to the Fribourg Declaration, since it puts people back into their ability to give meaning to their existence, their way of life, their way of speaking, of bringing up a child, of making a family, of living in a space, eating, taking care of themselves, and so on. This definition of culture embodies the very essence of all fundamental rights. This definition of culture is the basis for the development of cultural rights.

It is essential to understand that for this system of human rights to function and find its full meaning, we cannot pick and choose among the rights that interest us while ignoring the others. They are interdependent and indivisible. The Declaration on Cultural Rights sets out 8 cultural rights relating to the notions of identity, diversity, heritage, community, participation, education, information and cooperation.

I am presenting them under three sets of rights.

The first set of rights relates to the ability and legitimacy to cultivate one's identity. The right to identity fights against all forms of discrimination, assignment and reducing people to categories or prejudices, thereby developing the conditions for people to express themselves about themselves. This right also fights against all forms of determinism, i.e. the constraints imposed on people to live an assigned life. It asserts that a person builds their identity throughout life, freely, in interaction with the cultural resources of their environment.

The right to identity must go hand in hand with the right to diversity. Diversity is consubstantial with identity and freedom within identity. One example is biodiversity: a plant doesn't grow on its own, it interacts with its environment. Similarly, in a democratic society, we grow and flourish in interaction with a diversity of ways of thinking. The right to diversity fights against all forms of standardisation, and opens the door to the ability to reflect on interactions with a diversity of cultural resources. Sometimes, these interactions can lead to conflict or misunderstanding, and in these cases, mediation plays a crucial role.

Secondly, time is essential, since people and structures have a history. Recognising and working on this history enables us to choose what we want to pass on to future generations. Putting ourselves back in time gives us the ability to act on our values, our practices and our conception of the world. It also allows for the expression of multiple points of view on history, including conflicting interpretations.

The second set of rights relates to the cultivation and sharing of knowledge: the right to education and the right to information. In the sense of cultural rights, this means fighting against anything that relegates people to ignorance. Everyone has knowledge to pass on. The humiliation experienced in learning can be understood through cultural rights. This knowledge is not recognised because of our own cultural references. Opening up everyone's ability to learn and teach. In a learning relationship, knowledge is shared and mutual progress is made.

With today's massive flow of information, the right to information requires attention to the diversity of sources, and to the way in which information is resourced and disseminated. This includes the ability to correct incorrect information. New technologies make it possible to disseminate information widely, but they also make it more difficult to discuss and review it. Algorithms reinforce polarisation by reinforcing closed mindsets. It's important not to get locked into a narrow way of thinking.



The third set of rights builds on the previous ones: cultivating sharing and organisation. Three rights open up these perspectives: the right to community, participation and cooperation. The right to community recognises that people are not isolated individuals, but cultivate ties around common ground that they want to preserve, develop and pass on. This right fights against unwanted community isolation and communitarian excesses. We need to see people as individuals creating ties in their environment, belonging to multiple communities and cultivating common ground.

The right to take part in cultural life, as set out in the Fribourg Declaration, implies that we cannot simply offer people things to consume. Participation must enable everyone to take part, to contribute and to benefit from it. Joëlle Zask defines the verb “to participate” in these three dimensions, providing a full understanding of the right to participate.

Finally, the right to cooperation is the right to organise with others to act together. Understood as a cultural right, it gets us to take a close look at governance methods, the legitimacy of participants in decision-making and the negotiation of interests. This enhances the value of partnerships and the quality of relationships within a cooperative framework. The right to cooperation draws our attention to the way in which the rules of the game are made, and to the shared responsibility in the action taken.

Fundamental rights are a political decision on how to live together and form a society. As the authors of these rights, we have a responsibility to commit to them collectively.