Science for peace?: A history of the British Council’s cultural relations

Alice Naisbitt
Acknowledgements

Series editor
Christine Wilson

Series manager
Anna Duenbier and Izzah Meyer

Special thanks to
James Perkins
Jen Bardsley
Stephanie Renforth

The author
Alice Naisbitt is an ESRC-funded PhD student at the University of Manchester, working out of the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine (CHSTM). Her research uses the lens of ‘science diplomacy’ to explore the science initiatives and activities of the British Council in the 20th century. This is done in order to gain a better understanding of the place of science in the realm of British Council cultural relations and understand how science fit within this turbulent period of British foreign relations. Her research project makes use of virtually untapped British Council archival material held at The National Archives, Kew.

The contributor
Dr Jen Bardsley is the Global Head of Science for the British Council, the UK’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. She is responsible for strategic planning and sector positioning of the British Council science portfolio worldwide, and works closely with an expert science team to deliver research, capacity strengthening, and inclusive research activities globally. Prior to starting with British Council in July 2019, she was a research development manager in health and life sciences at King’s College London and University of Oxford, following a research career in bone biology, archaeological science, and X-ray scattering methods.
The series editor

Christine Wilson has worked in the British Council since 2004. As Director Research and Insight, she oversees a global portfolio spanning education, arts and culture, youth and skills, as well as exploring the role of cultural relations in supporting the UK’s soft power aims. She is accountable for global standards and practice, ethics, programmes, partnerships and networks. She directs the Next Generation research series, which aims to engage youth voices around the world and contribute to improved policymaking. She previously directed the Hammamet Conference, which brought together leaders from the UK and North Africa, and co-chaired the steering group for Peace and Beyond, which marked the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement by exploring international approaches to sustainable peacebuilding. Christine is an Advisory Board member at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

The British Council

We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide.

We work directly with individuals to help them gain the skills, confidence and connections to transform their lives and shape a better world in partnership with the UK. We support them to build networks and explore creative ideas, to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications.

DOI

©Alice Naisbitt licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International Licence, part of the British Council’s Cultural Relations Collection first published at www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations

Foreword

The Cultural Relations Collection essay series, produced by the British Council’s Research and Insight Team, asks early-career and established researchers to examine the theory and practice of cultural relations. We invite fresh perspectives on what has been the British Council’s business for almost 90 years – building connections, understanding and trust.

This edition explores how cultural relations can contribute to peacebuilding in different settings and contexts.

Peacebuilding, and the erosion of peace, are intimately connected to many major challenges facing us nationally and internationally. No community that is divided by conflict, or the expectation or experience of conflict, can give adequate attention to less immediate but equally destructive threats, such as environmental degradation or economic instability.

Yet those same factors, left unaddressed, can only increase the likelihood of conflict. The result is a vicious circle which is increasingly difficult to escape.

These essays help us to understand what is meant by a cultural relations approach to peacebuilding and to demonstrate that this approach is both valid and valuable.

Each of the essays comes from a different disciplinary and regional perspective, but some common themes are evident.

One is Galtung’s concept of positive (as opposed to negative) peace: peace as an active participatory experience, rather than simply the absence of violence. This supports proponents of cultural relations – and is a riposte to those who argue that soft power interventions in hard power situations are mere wishful thinking.

Also implicit in many of the essays is the importance of enabling safe spaces in which cultural relations can take place. Inclusivity and an atmosphere of trust are a sine qua non if citizens and communities are to experience a sense of their own agency.
Related to this is deep listening (listening experienced as a positive and empathetic activity, rather than simply an absence of interruption), a topic explored in depth by one of our essayists. Listening to others’ truth and speaking our own, not only to power but to ourselves, is at the core of cultural relations – and especially in our peacebuilding efforts. No true or lasting peace is built on half-truths and evasions.

Indeed, the importance of facing up to our own organisational and national history is addressed directly in one of these essays; and behind several authors stands the shadow of colonialism.

As in previous editions of this series, there is much here for readers, and the British Council itself, to reflect on and absorb. Peacebuilding is a complex and constantly developing subject, to which these essays make a valuable contribution.

The British Council supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. To meet that goal, we will continue to explore with researchers, artists and peace practitioners how our cultural relations work can contribute to peacebuilding globally; this series is just the start.

Scott McDonald
Chief Executive, British Council
Welcome to the latest edition of the Cultural Relations Collection. As always, it has been stimulating to read fresh perspectives on cultural relations by new voices in the field. Previous editions in the Collection have examined cultural relations and climate change, and the impact of COVID-19 on cultural exchange. In 2022, we invited submissions on cultural relations and peacebuilding, given our renewed emphasis on the role of building trust and connections as central to the conditions required for sustainable peace, and in the spirit of what John-Paul Lederach calls ‘an approach that addresses the culture of violence by transforming it into the culture of dialogue’.

This is not a new area for the British Council, which emerged from the global crisis leading up to the Second World War in the realisation that building trust and understanding between the UK and the rest of the world was crucial. In 2018, which marked the centenary of the end of the First World War, the centenary of Nobel Peace Laureate Nelson Mandela, and the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday / Belfast Agreement, the British Council worked with partners in Northern Ireland on the conference Peace and Beyond¹, an examination of global approaches to building lasting peace including reflections from contributors from countries including Lebanon, South Africa, and Colombia.

In 2023, the need to examine the conditions for peacebuilding are as relevant as they were in 2018. Colleagues around the world continue to work in communities affected by conflict, such as Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Yemen, to name but three. At the time of writing, we are working on research on the role of cultural events in addressing conflict and sharing the values of freedom and international co-operation, given the UK’s role in hosting Eurovision on behalf of Ukraine.

And so, to the individual contributions herein. At the 2018 Peace and Beyond conference, Judith Thompson, Chief Commissioner for the Commission for Victims and Survivors², said: ‘Building social trust [...]in a society transitioning from

---
¹ www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace
² www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace
conflict is an essential ingredient to [...] building a better future for everyone and the generations that follow.’ This collection builds on that imperative by breaking down varied approaches to the building of trust.

Alice Naisbitt examines the role of science as a peacebuilding tool in two ways: that the connections built reinforce the trust vital to harmonious relations; and that the outcomes of scientific co-operation address drivers of conflict, such as resource scarcity. As with Hannah Dalgliesh’s contribution on the soft power of astronomy in a previous collection³, Naisbitt underpins the role of science as providing neutral, common ground for collaboration.

Nasibitt does not shy away from the historic challenges that have been presented to the British Council over the years, and the accusation that cultural relations – in science, arts, language, or education – run the risk of being instrumentalised for the soft power outcomes, rather than their development objectives. This theme is picked up in Daniel Feather’s fascinating history of educational co-operation between the UK and South Africa, including through the apartheid era when South Africa was globally isolated. He draws the distinction between cultural diplomacy and cultural relations, although highlights where those lines can become blurred. While not uncritical of the role of the UK and the British Council over this period, his essay makes a powerful argument for the place of education in supporting a country’s transition from structural violence to a more equitable and peaceful state.

Three essays focus on arts and culture as tools for building peace. George Wilkes et al. consider the role of the cultural relations organisation in bridging the local and the global; the need not to overlook the smallest detail of any given conflict, while still recognising the power of building links across borders and amplifying the voice of those affected by conflict. Their emphasis on the need to deal with memory, whether of previous friendships, or of deep trauma, also harks back to contributions in Peace and Beyond⁴ by Candice Mama and Cindy Mizher.

The role of the arts to make visible what may previously have been hidden, as well as to imagine new futures, is central to the essay of Daniela Fazio-Vargas and Carlos Pineda-Ramos. They make a powerful case for artistic expression as a means by which different voices can be elevated and building a space in

³ www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations
⁴ www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-reports/reflections-inclusive-peace
which difference is recognised and valued, and that only in this way, can true peace be achieved. Nar Bahadur Saud takes this up in his essay that reminds us that before the arts can support peace and justice, they too must recognise difference. His contribution centres on the need to empower and enable disabled people to express themselves through the arts, and that in doing so not only addresses the inequalities they face as individuals but will contribute to more equitable and peaceful societies.

2022 brought sport to the fore in the discourse on positive peacebuilding – that is, not just addressing violent conflict, but addressing the drivers of conflict, such as inherent violence against marginalised communities, or the continuation of structural inequities. Many people looked to the World Cup in Qatar with mixed feelings, as to whether this was ‘sportswashing’ or an opportunity to open up a human rights dialogue on the world stage. In his essay, Grant Jarvie explores the link between sports and diplomacy, and suggests a more prominent role for sport in development, particularly in peacebuilding, given its emphasis on team spirit, co-operation, and solidarity.

Lastly, Emily Kasriel examines a concept at the heart of peacebuilding – listening. Her essay on deep listening illustrates an approach that prepares individuals for encounters across any divides they find within their communities, however they are experiencing conflict. Drawing on both theory and practice, she draws out the transformational nature of this method, and the impact it has had on individuals and communities around the world, enabling them to truly see, hear and understand the person opposite them.

One of the participants in a deep listening exercise said it allowed her ‘to create an atmosphere of inclusivity, trust and positive discourse’. It feels as if we are in a time in which that approach is urgently needed. I hope too that this Cultural Relations Collection makes a similarly positive contribution, and I urge all readers to embrace that spirit.

Christine Wilson  
Director of Research and Insight, British Council
Science is an essential part of the British Council’s strategic agenda. The distinctive ability of science to address global challenges, directly influence socioeconomic development, and forge transnational networks means that it plays an essential and transformative role in both international affairs and cultural relations. This essay reflects on how the British Council, as an organisation that has existed for nearly 90 years, has used science as a tool within its cultural relations programmes to facilitate peace. Whilst peacebuilding and the tackling of global challenges – a traditional objective of science-based international cooperation – are relatively contemporary terms with specific connotations, the British Council has been involved in broad efforts to facilitate peace, through scientific cultural relations, since the Second World War. This essay will explore examples of the British Council’s science activity from 1945–2022 and exciting archival material to trace the development of science-based cultural relations at the British Council, focusing on those efforts which contributed to the organisation’s peacebuilding strategies.

While cuts in the British Council’s expenditure have resulted in the scaling back of their science work, science is still mobilised to significant effect by the British Council and often geared towards the tackling of global challenges. Many, if not all, of the big challenges that face humanity in the twenty-first century require a level of scientific understanding and therefore science needs to be integrated into transdisciplinary solutions for said problems (such as renewable energy, climate change and disease control). The shared nature of these challenges means that they are often the perfect starting point for the facilitation of bilateral or multilateral relations. Tackling global challenges also allows actors to contribute to peace by reducing the likelihood that communities around the world live in fear of conflict, displacement or starvation. Not only do solutions to global challenges inherently require international collaboration but the necessity of such collaboration can spark fruitful cooperation between politically disparate countries; an idea inherent to the contemporary notion of science diplomacy (Royal Society/AAAS, 2010) (Copeland, 2011).
Science is then connected to peacebuilding within the British Council’s post-war work in two ways: through the idea that science can provide solutions to global problems which hinder the maintenance of peace, and in the assumption that working collaboratively towards these solutions will facilitate peaceful relations. This latter assumption means that national and international actors can use science as an effective soft power tool of foreign relations (Nye, 1990) (Rivera, 2015).

The historical nature of this essay means that a couple things must be acknowledged when looking at the British Council’s peacebuilding strategies. The language and terminology we now use in reference to ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘global challenges’ cannot always be applied retrospectively. In the twentieth century, ‘peace’ was used in the British Council’s documents almost exclusively in reference to the prevention of active conflict or the maintenance of stable relations in the aftermath of conflict. Definitions of peace and peacebuilding have however, evolved. Johan Galtung (1964) prompted a revaluation in peace research when he distinguished between negative peace and positive peace. In doing so Galtung moved the discourse away from a perception of peace that was wholly based on the prevention of direct violence such as assault and warfare (negative peace) to one that also included ‘the integration of human society’ (positive peace) (Galtung, 1964, 2). Positive peace policies thus included proposals to improve human understanding through communication, education and international cooperation.

Another way of encapsulating the evolution of the peacebuilding discourse is with Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals which interlinks peace, justice, and good governance. The precedents for which can be seen in the British Council’s documents through terminology such as ‘mutual goodwill’, ‘international cooperation’ or ‘modern institution building’. Also seen on the British Council’s website which states: ‘we support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide’.

Likewise, it was not until towards the end of the twentieth century that the language of global challenges was articulated explicitly by international organisations such as the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, but that does not

---

5 Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Peace here is associated with a host of related concepts from the idea of justice for all to the establishment of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, to the fight against corruption (2015)

6 www.britishcouncil.org/about-us
mean that scientists, policymakers, and activists were not working towards similar goals before then. David Kaldewey (2018) explains this semantic shift in the international narrative from the mid-twentieth century concept of scientific ‘problems’ to the current narrative of ‘grand challenges’. Kaldewey explains how the rhetoric has changed but the ideas or issues have remained the same. While now the British Council may talk explicitly about global challenges, the issues included in this remit – food security, conservation, energy efficiency – have been included in the organisation’s scope for decades just without the same semantic indicators. By acknowledging this evolution, it remains possible to trace a history of the British Council’s use of science to tackle global issues in the pursuit of peace.

This essay aims to highlight historical examples where the British Council has used science within their post-war cultural relations to such ends. This includes the various programmes of bilateral people exchange (a crucially important element of cultural relations) often organised in times of political tension to improve opportunities for peaceful cooperation, as with the Soviet Union during the Cold War (from 1959 onwards), or with Egypt in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis (1956). Science was then incorporated into the British Council’s overseas development and aid agenda from the 1960s onwards where capacity-building initiatives were mobilised to provide solutions to regional problems (irrigation concerns, food security, lack of energy resources) and in doing so facilitate modern and efficient institutions necessary for both democracy and peace.

In reference to these development programmes, it must be acknowledged that the British Council’s initiatives often had colonial roots. Many of the British Council’s programmes implemented during this era of decolonisation reflected the typical asymmetrical relationship of Global North benefactor and Global South dependent, and while certain contemporary policies, like the Newton Fund’s insistence on match-funding with partner countries aim to reduce these dependencies and give power back to countries in the Global South, the post-colonial legacy remains (Dalgleish, 2021).

The environmental turn in international affairs of the 1970s also impacted the British Council’s work as they began to facilitate projects, mostly through Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) funding, which targeted environmental issues as a direct barrier to peace and security. The concern with the environment remains a big part of the British Council’s work in the twenty-first century, for example, with initiatives
such as The Climate Connection, FameLab, and bilateral agreements such as the South Asia Science Programme. The essay ends with consideration of the British Council’s contemporary and current use of science to facilitate peace throughout the global challenges framework.

In constructing a broad (and fairly chronological) history of the British Council’s science-based initiatives, this work aims to explore the place of science within the British Council’s concept of cultural relations historically, and ask how does science’s distinct ability to address global challenges contribute to peace and security?

---

Twentieth century knowledge and people exchange: The anglo-soviet cultural agreement (1959) and the uk-uar\(^8\) scientific agreement (1961)

A central pillar of the British Council’s work since its establishment in 1934 has been the exchange of people. Exchanges involve mostly students or established experts and cover a truly vast array of subjects including from within art, music, and education. From the end of the Second World War, a significant portion of these exchanges took place in scientific fields and in the early 1960s, science subjects began to dominate. The 1966 British Council Annual Report remarks on the ‘continuing upward trend in the proportion [of exchanges and study tours] concerned with science, agriculture, medicine and technology’ (British Council, 1966, 38). By this time science subjects represented about half the total number of exchanges, compared with about a third at the end of the 1950s. Twenty years later, in 1986, science still accounted for half the total number of people brought into the UK under the British Council’s auspices (British Council, 1986).

The internal body responsible for the scientific portion of the exchanges was the British Council’s Science Advisory Committee (SAC). The SAC was established in May 1941 to advise on how best to promote British scientific interests and research overseas. Over time, the SAC focused more on the facilitation of genuine contact with foreign publics and the establishment of friendly relations between communities of experts. The British Council organised and sponsored both incoming and outgoing visits of scientific experts and students resulting in a constant exchange of knowledge and skills. Exchange embodied a huge part of the British Council’s early work but while the exchange of knowledge was a vital part of these programmes, the exchanges also embodied the broader objective of establishing mutual understanding and goodwill between nations by providing channels of non-political dialogue.

\(^8\) The UAR – United Arab Republic – was a short-lived political union between Syria and Egypt established in 1958. By 1961, Syria had already seceded the union but Egypt continued to be regarded officially as the UAR for another decade.
In the 1940s and 1950s the British Council was involved in a host of scientific exchanges, and they became especially important in their work with countries with which political relations were strained. Relations with the Soviet Union form the most obvious case study for this, as when it was established in 1955, the Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council began to see scientific exchanges as a way to circumnavigate Cold War tensions. The articulation of scientific exchanges as a way to facilitate peace and goodwill was made more explicit with the signing of an Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement in 1959.

By 1959, the escalation of the Cold War meant that Britain and the USSR were now on opposite sides of a global ideological conflict, separated by the East/West or capitalist/communist divide. The British Council used cultural exchanges to facilitate connections across the Iron Curtain and establish points of cooperation outside of the usual political channels (Goncalves, 2019). Science was viewed by British Council members as a particularly useful and politically neutral avenue for cooperation with the Soviets, as summarised in 1941 by Professor Ifor Evans in a letter to James Crowther, the then Secretary of the SAC: ‘I am convinced that science, as a comparatively neutral subject, is safe ground on which to do any cultural contact with the USSR’.⁹

In March 1959, members of the British Council travelled to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviet State Committee for Cultural Relations for an Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement: Exchanges in the Fields of Science, Technology, Education and Culture. The exchanges covered a vast array of cultural activities, including exchanges of artists, Shakespearean actors, ballet dancers and teachers, however a substantial portion of the exchanges were in the scientific and technological fields. The breadth of scientific topics included in these exchanges was significant and ranged from metallurgy to protozoology, space research to chemistry (British Council, 1960). The exchanges covered visits ranging anywhere from two weeks to the whole academic year and involved both individuals and large delegations with specific sections of the population identified as crucial targets for exchange, including postgraduate students and industrial workers. The Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreements became a staple of the British Council’s work and were renewed biennially until the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

⁹ Correspondence from Professor Ifor Evans to James Crowther, 29th July 1941, BW 64/10, British Council Country Series: USSR, The National Archives, Kew
In December 1959, the UK and Soviet governments officially ratified the British Council’s treaty with the stated hope that it would ‘promote the further improvement of relations between the two countries and thereby assist in reducing international tension’ (British Council, 1960). This is a clear link between science and peacebuilding within the remit of the British Council’s work. When political and ideological differences caused tension in diplomatic relations, cultural relations could be used to circumnavigate these problems and provide channels of communication. These channels could contribute to the lessening of tensions, here not only between Britain and the Soviet Union but between the East and the West more generally.

The mutually beneficial nature of scientific exchange (which constituted a sizeable portion of the agreement) was a major motivation for the governments to sign such an agreement, especially as the Soviets put such a great emphasis on science. Science can bring very tangible socioeconomic benefits, such as improvements in industrial capacity, new medical treatments, and enhanced engineering training, as well as the usual benefits of cultural relations which are harder to quantify, such as mutual understanding and stronger interpersonal connections. While the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement did cover a vast array of disciplines outside the scientific and technological fields, it was the science exchanges the Soviets placed the most emphasis on during the negotiations. The beneficial and applicable nature of most science to societal problems and the scientific nature of much of Cold War competition (space race, nuclear power, high-tech weaponry) meant that scientific knowledge exchange was highly coveted by both the British and the Soviets, and provided fertile ground for significant, if often backhanded, international cooperation (Krige, 2006) (Wolfe, 2018). Science, therefore, had a distinct ability to forge connections even in times of conflict and encourage relations that were marginally more peaceful (Royal Society/AAAS, 2010).

The exchanges did not always run smoothly; some of the British Council members remarked on the occasionally difficult attitudes of the Soviet officials and there were big concerns about the perceived lack of reciprocity. Richard Speaight, Director of East-West Contacts at the Cultural Relations Department, and the main government liaison for the Cultural Agreements in the 1960s, was particularly concerned that it should not look as though the Soviets were gaining more from the agreements than the British were (Speaight, 1962). Issues over reciprocity occasionally delayed
treaty negotiations but these concerns were never enough to risk the Agreements altogether, and despite Cold War tensions the exchanges continued until the fall of the Soviet Union. Everyone agreed, as Ifor Evans summarised in his letter to Crowther (mentioned earlier in this essay) that these science exchanges were a productive and neutral way of maintaining communication links with the Soviets.

Similar exchange agreements were signed with other nations too and very rarely just for the transfer of knowledge itself. An agreement signed around the same time was the UK-UAR Scientific Agreement, signed in 1961. Like the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement, but this time concerned exclusively with science, the UK-UAR Scientific Agreement laid out terms for formal exchanges of students, experts, and teachers in a multitude of scientific disciplines. However, the agreement with Egypt (the UAR) was much more geared towards Egypt benefiting from British training and experts rather than a reciprocal agreement of mutual benefit (Williams, 1961). Egypt at that time wanted to modernise their institutions and economy and saw the sending of students abroad to train in ‘modern, developed countries’ as an essential part of that modernisation. Student exchange would allow the next generation of scientists, leaders, and industrialists to capitalise on the advice of foreign experts and build connections with world-leading institutions. At the request of Egyptian officials, agricultural and medical sciences dominated the exchange programmes which showed how regional problems (food scarcity, low crop yields, disease rates) could shape the British Council’s cultural relations.

Egypt’s desire to establish itself as a world player in the post-war decades through improving their scientific and technical manpower merged with Britain’s need to prove it was still a global power and redeem itself after the Suez Crisis (where it was revealed that Britain colluded with France and Israel to invade Egypt and take control of the Suez Canal following Gamal Abdul Nasser’s decision to nationalise the important waterway in July 1956 [Smith, 2008]). In using the UK-UAR Scientific Agreement to re-establish ties with Egypt, however, the British Council also had intentions based in the national interest. By training Egyptian scientists and providing British assistance to the building up of Egyptian scientific institutions, the British Council could exert the UK’s influence in a country that was now far out of their control. Britain’s semi-colonial relationship with Egypt was alluded to at various points throughout the British Council’s work in the country and often used as implicit justification for increased British involvement.
in Egypt, especially in educational and scientific fields. William Bell for example, Director General of the Technical Education and Training for Overseas Countries Organisation (TETOC), in commenting on the joint ODM-British Council work in Egypt, referred to Britain as the natural choice for technical assistance as Egypt’s institutions ‘already follow the British pattern’ due to the period of occupation (Bell, 1976).

The agreement reflected the type of asymmetrical relationship typical of the post-colonial period when an (ex)-imperial power was involved. It implied Egyptian dependence on British training, funding and expertise and showed the British attempting to exert their influence in a region that was strategically valuable to them (for trade, oil and standing against the USSR) (Williams, 1961). This post-colonial dynamic in relation to ‘developing’ nations can also be seen in the development assistance framework the British Council employed for ODA purposes in the late 1960s onwards.

While the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement tried to provide communication links during conflict, the UK-UAR Agreement was set up to do so in the aftermath of conflict. It can be seen as an attempt to pave the way to renewed and peaceful relations between Britain and Egypt in the aftermath of the disastrous Suez Crisis of Autumn 1956. The loss of the British Council’s presence in Egypt in 1956 was one of many consequences of Suez. As diplomatic ties between the two countries were severed, the British Council, which had maintained a presence in Egypt since 1938, were forced to withdraw. The UK-UAR Scientific Agreement represented the first formal British Council work in Egypt since 1956 and an attempt by a non-governmental agency to re-establish relations using science.10

Peace in this instance, represented the emergence of renewed relations between the two countries and the establishment of lines of communication which could evolve into a more complete and productive diplomatic relationship. These scientific exchanges with their aims to build up Egypt’s scientific infrastructure and train the next generation of Egyptian scientists were not established to lessen an active conflict but rather emerged in the aftermath of one to facilitate the hope for renewed peace. While other attempts at cultural contact with Egypt fizzled out in the 1960s, science exchanges thrived.

10 Adam Hill’s (2021) article on British archaeologists’ involvement in the UNESCO Campaign for Nubia gives another detailed example of non-governmental actors using science to re-establish ties with Egypt in the aftermath of Suez. Available here: journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022009421997884
Science, with its ability to tackle regional challenges and aid in the development of modern, democratic institutions and economies, was able to provide valuable post-conflict communication links.

While the language of shared global challenges did not exist yet, and indeed the issues targeted by these instances of scientific knowledge exchange were not quite global in scale, you can begin to see how science became associated with peace and international cooperation. Whether science was mobilised by the British Council during conflicts, as with Soviet exchanges during the Cold War, or in the aftermath of conflict, as with Egypt in the post-Suez period, scientific-cultural relations were able to lay the necessary foundations for the re-establishment of goodwill and peaceful cooperation via mutually beneficial initiatives.
Oda, technical assistance and scientific development in the ‘third world’, 1960s–1980s

‘The Council must play its part in the work being done in underdeveloped areas and in this work, science and technology form the most important part’.

SAC Meeting Report, 17 October 1951

Changes in the British Council’s funding infrastructure in the late 1960s meant that the Ministry for Overseas Development (ODM), which was later absorbed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1970 and became known as the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), began to contribute a large portion of the British Council’s external funding. The ODA contributed funds to the British Council’s core budget for use on unspecified development programmes, and the British Council also became the agent in charge of specific ODA projects, such as the Technical Assistance programme

Development, peace, and security are now explicitly connected in contemporary international discourses, and officially recognised in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 16, which aims to ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (United Nations, 2022). However, even before the explicit link was made in official discourses between development and peace, the connection was recognised by the British Council, and science has often been utilised as a tool to achieve both.

11 Technical Assistance (TA), in the realm of the ODA, provided support and consultancy to overseas organisations concerned with a specific developmental need. It involved providing knowledge-based assistance to build organisational capacity in sectors such as agricultural management, industrial research and engineering.
did start to lay the groundwork for strategies which linked development to peaceful and secure societies.

A significant portion of these ODA funded activities that the British Council facilitated in the late 1960s to 1970s regarded science as a vital tool for development. Scientific and technological research and training could help to improve agricultural practices, establish better medical facilities, and enhance electrical and industrial infrastructure. Underlying these schemes, as with the UK-UAR Scientific Agreement mentioned earlier, was the assumption that improved scientific institutions and infrastructures were a necessary component of ‘third world’ development in the post-war era.

As such it must be acknowledged that these development assistance schemes were also rooted in a colonial context. Though established in the post-colonial era, the dynamic of the relationship between Britain and their ‘developing’ partner country was very much an imperial hangover. The asymmetrical or unequal nature of student exchange and higher education development projects has been explored by a variety of scholars (Sahel, 2018) (Ploner and Nada, 2019) (Sharpe, 2015) who expose how such initiatives were designed to exert British influence in areas of strategic importance and reinforce dependence on western aid. As so much of the British Council’s science work was tied up with education (both in the case of educating foreign scientists in Britain and in assisting in the development of science education infrastructure abroad), the development programmes also adhere to what Stein and de Andreotti (2016, 230) refer to as the Global North’s ‘civilizing’ mission in the Global South. In this sense, the expansion of a British/western form of higher education around the world in the post-colonial decades (since 1945) reinforced the notion of a singular correct idea of science and education. Everything that was good, advanced, and modern was measured in European terms, with an acceptance that western knowledge was universal and that the benefits of western higher education could be extended to developing countries so that they could ‘catch up’ on the universal path of human progress. Therefore, it is worth acknowledging that the following initiatives could be regarded within this asymmetrical framework.

One of most significant schemes which utilised science as a tool of development was the Technical Assistance programmes or Technical Cooperation Training Programmes (TCTP) that the British Council facilitated on behalf of ODA. Technical assistance, as defined by Cox and Norrington-Davies (2019, 6), refers to ‘knowledge-based assistance to governments intended
to shape policies and institutions, support implementation and build organisational capacity'. Predictably for an activity that is performed by a vast array of actors, definitions of technical assistance vary. Technical assistance programmes perpetuated by both individual countries and international organisations like the UN, have existed since the end of the Second World War and still exist now, so objectives and rationales have developed across time. In the 1960s–1980s, and in the context of the British Council’s work, technical assistance schemes involved giving aid to less-developed countries to provide them with the expertise and manpower needed for development.

Technical assistance schemes involved the facilitation of both outgoing and incoming movement of people and experts. Many British experts were sent into developing countries to teach and present solutions to problems in their areas of specialisation (such as agricultural development, fisheries, education, public health etc). Alternatively, through the technical assistance schemes in the 1970s and 1980s, the British Council offered scholarships and specialist training for overseas students/specialists to attend in the UK, to allow them to learn unique skills from a wide range of experts in specialist educational facilities. These students could then take that knowledge and expertise back to their own country and use it to build up educational and scientific infrastructure.

As is perhaps obvious from the above description, a lot of technical assistance schemes involved advice, aid and education in scientific fields. For the British Council, in the countries they most targeted for ODA aid – mainly those in the Middle East and Southeast Asia – these schemes often fell in the realm of agriculture and health. These types of development schemes can therefore be easily seen as the precursors to modern development assistance/aid schemes based on global challenges (public health, environmental security, food production), and therefore arguably also associated with the conditions necessary for peace.

In this framework, agriculture took on new significance both in development work at large but also in the British Council’s aid and cultural relations. The early 1970s saw the British Council turn their attention to agricultural projects in developing regions like the Middle East and Far East. These agricultural projects involved research or agreements regarding irrigation techniques, crop rotations and the introduction of new technology. Medical research and public health development similarly began to form large parts of ODA work facilitated by the British Council.
as tackling regional and global health issues were pushed to the front of the international agenda. By the mid-1990s ODA health projects facilitated by the British Council included work in Burma trying to tackle AIDS; helping to reform Chile’s health service; and trying to deal with Malaria in India (British Council, 1995).

India was the largest recipient of British Council development assistance by the mid-1980s. As well as sponsoring many Indian scholars to complete their scientific and industrial training in the UK, the British Council also used technical cooperation projects to assist development and begin to target big scientific problems. The 1985 Annual Report claims that the British Council had at least 70 Technical Cooperation projects in India, which covered a ‘wide spectrum in the fields of technology, renewable resources and medicine’. This included an energy recycling project in association with Salford University and a collaborative research project on wheat production between the Plant Breeding Institute in Cambridge and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (British Council, 1985).

By the 1990s, the goal of tackling global challenges was becoming more explicit in the British Council’s work. This was not only because of the growing prevalence of global challenges in international affairs but because of the British Council’s shift in the late twentieth century towards strategies of work which combined cultural relations with development aid. With these changes in vocabulary and discourse came a more explicit understanding of the relationship between science, development and peace. The 1996–2000 British Council Corporate Plan, clearly laid out how the British Council were committed to using science within their work to tackle the big challenges in global affairs:

‘…we help build institutional capacity in the sustainable use of natural resources; we support initiatives to counter global environmental damage and to strengthen technology and skills transfer in manufacturing, infrastructure development and renewable natural resources, thus advancing increased economic activity’.

In expanding on the above work in the context of the Middle East, the plan laid out how this sort of work aimed to encourage ‘peace, stability and economic progress… by increasing access to education and training’ especially in scientific and technological fields. Technical assistance therefore represented a clear link between science, development, and peace. By providing and improving education around the world in technical and industrial fields the British Council could contribute to the British aid effort by tackling regional
and global challenges and thus contributing towards peacebuilding. Peace could be achieved by improving the ties between nations and laying the foundations for economically prosperous (or self-sufficient) democratic nations with strong scientific, agricultural, and medical institutions.

In this form, through the turn towards technical assistance, the British Council’s science work aimed towards the establishment and maintenance of peace in a different capacity than first explored in the exchange programmes. Knowledge transfer had the intended side-effect of providing communication links between countries during or in the aftermath of conflict. The above ODA technical assistance strategies which emerged in the post-war, post-colonial period moved towards a different understanding of peacebuilding. A concept of peace that is linked to development and the tackling of regional, if not global, challenges. In this conception, like in contemporary understandings, building peaceful and secure societies is dependent on many factors including increasing food production, improving public health facilities and combatting climate change.
The environment as a global challenge

We can see in some of the work just described in the 1980s the environment began to be introduced onto the British Council’s agenda as the organisation oriented its scientific work towards issues now recognisable as regional, if not global, challenges. By the 1990s and early 2000s these early (mostly ODA funded) projects had developed into a concerted effort within the British Council’s work to tackle environmental issues; an effort which is prominent in the British Council’s strategy today.

The famous UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972 represented a landmark moment the international battle against climate change. It laid out principles for the preservation of the human environment and set a precedent for international cooperation on such issues. Monitoring the effects of climate change would require an international effort, as would developing sustainable solutions to the issues of environmental degradation. The necessity for such collaboration across borders was sustained in nearly all future endeavours to combat climate change, including, for example, the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in November 1988, the first COP meeting held in Berlin in 1995, and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. The threat of climate change had become a solidified issue in international relations, and the example of the British Council shows that this was also the case for cultural relations. Bolstered by the evolving discourse and importance placed on environmental issues by international actors, the British Council turned more of its attention to issues which came under its remit, and in doing so, began to target issues which were explicitly regarded as global challenges.

Simultaneously, understandings of what was meant by peace and peacebuilding also began to change. While the prevention of conflict and the maintenance of stable international relations remains the key pillar of peacebuilding strategies, other factors became synonymous with peace too, encapsulated by Galtung’s conception of positive peace. This included the idea that communities around the world, in a peaceful society, should be able to live without fear of displacement, starvation or climate-exacerbated natural disasters. This concept is
crucial to what some actors call the securitisation of the environment. The EU in 2007 identified climate change as international security risk as climate issues such as resource scarcity (caused by changing crop yields and reduced water supplies) can aggravate existing conflicts, start new wars, or cause mass displacement (issues exacerbated by global population increases). Therefore, pro-active peacebuilding strategies include efforts to protect the environment and mitigate the effects of climate change.

By the mid-1990s, the British Council had set up an Environmental Projects Fund and their official strategy included a direct commitment to global environmental issues:

‘The Council is committed to supporting initiatives that reduce future environmental problems. Our aim is to build up local capability through education and training in the sustainable use of natural resources. We focus on forest conservation, biodiversity, energy efficiency and work that counters environmental damage.’ (British Council, 1995)

There was still an emphasis on education and training, and the British Council continued to fund and facilitate thousands of scholars moving into and out of the country in pursuit of scientific and technological knowledge (e.g., in 1995 the British Council funded over 9000 scientific visits). But they also supported an increasing number of research projects and networking events that would bring together those interested in environmental problems. For example, in 1995 in Punta Arenas, Chile, the British Council supported the ODA in setting up a satellite-receiving station that could monitor the ozone layers at the Universidad de Magallanes. Not only could the satellite contribute to broader scientific understanding about the ozone layer, but it also had immediate local impact. At certain times of the year there were sharp increases in UV radiation and the satellite could provide warning to the local population when this UV radiation rose to levels that could be dangerous to health.

In 1996, the British Council began working with a consortium led by the Natural Resources Institute and financed by the UN, to create a sustainable regional management strategy to protect biodiversity in Tanzania. In 1998, in Indonesia, the British Council was involved with work aimed at countering the lack of trained experts. They managed a £1.8
million DFID-funded environmental biotechnology project which built partnerships between 15 institutions in Indonesia and the UK to transfer the required skills. More than 30 biotechnologists visited the UK in 1998 for training and follow-up workshops were put on in Indonesia to enhance the researchers’ understanding of biosafety (British Council, 1998).

In 2002 under the umbrella of the British Council’s Connecting Futures programme, three groups of young scientists from UK universities collaborated on research projects with students from South Valley and Suez Canal Universities in Egypt. Their work concerned science of ‘genuine importance’; investigating environmental pressures on coral reefs in Sinai; mapping Sinai’s natural resources and analysing the challenges of social development in Egypt. Thus, science again worked to overcome global challenges and at the same time create conditions and relationships necessary for peace. One of the British participants in the programme commented on the distinctive ability of science to forge connections: ‘science formed a really good common bond’. Science could not only advance knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and help provide solutions to environmental problems, but it could also contribute to development and reach across cultural divides to forge connections between communities.

Of course, environmental degradation and climate change were not the only global challenge that required scientific attention, and indeed the British Council’s work in this time still involved research and knowledge exchange projects focused on health, poverty and gender equality. The climate issue does however provide the perfect case study for seeing how the British Council used science to tackle global challenges and contribute to peace. Climate stability is an essential prerequisite for peace (Penny, 2007) (Gateretse-Ngoga, 2022), a fact which became recognised both in the international discourse of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and in the work of the British Council. As explored next in relation to the British Council’s flagship programme, The Climate Connection, environmental issues are also perfect for the construction of good cultural relations as they can bring together people of all nations to discuss issues which affect us all.

---

13 The Department for International Development was a government department between 1997 and 2020 and was responsible for administering foreign aid. In 2020 it ceased to exist as a separate entity and Boris Johnson’s administration merged it with the FO to become the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

14 An initiative to build links between young people in the UK and the Muslim world.
21st century British Council science work: centering the climate connection

Although recent cuts in the British Council’s expenditure have resulted in science losing some of its priority with their work (though it remains part of the official Charter), the organisation still maintains a substantial effort to tackle global challenges as part of its contribution to overseas development, the facilitation of international connections, and the conditions necessary for peace. Not only are problems such as poverty, resource scarcity and environmental vulnerability, massive drivers of regional and global instability, but in the quest for scientific solutions to these problems the British Council can bring together networks of diverse communities of activists, policymakers, and scientists. Science is thus mobilised in the British Council’s work in two main ways, to either facilitate research projects that can provide solutions or insight to these shared problems, or to provide platforms through which to bring together transnational networks of actors to enhance mutual understanding and reciprocal cultural relations. The British Council’s involvement in such initiatives, especially the ones which aim to find cross-cutting responses to global challenges and climate issues mean that it is a key contributor to the ODA goals of peace and sustainable development.

A key difference between the British Council’s objectives now and its work in the twentieth century is that peacebuilding and global challenges are an explicit part of the organisations’ strategic agenda now, seen in the previously mentioned reference to ‘peace and prosperity’ in the British Council’s current purpose statement.15 Sometimes this objective is pursued explicitly through initiatives designed specifically to facilitate peace and prevent conflict, but other times it is done less directly. Scientific solutions or science-based connections lead the way for peace and security as climate change, pandemics and food shortages (to name a few problems) directly impede people’s ability to live peacefully. Finding solutions to those issues requires transnational
connections that in turn help to encourage cultural understandings, cross-border friendships, and mutual goodwill. The preliminary research report for the British Council’s 2021 project ‘The Big Conversation: Climate Change’ also suggests that ‘anchoring group discussions around concrete issues (such as climate change) can help individuals to more clearly articulate, and elaborate, their opinions which ultimately can lead to better deliberation’ (Bruter et al, 2021, 6). Placing climate change and environmental issues at the centre of cultural relations creates the space for fruitful discussions between peoples of different nations and allows participants to acknowledge both their similarities and differences, which itself leads to more equal, diverse and inclusive cultural relations.

The Climate Connection programme is one of the most significant ways in which the British Council targets these issues in the twenty-first century. The aim of The Climate Connection is to bring together people around the world to meet the challenges of climate change. Using arts, culture, education and the English language, the project provides the space and the platform to spark ideas, innovation and pave the way for genuine progress. Here, science can provide a distinctive commonality between these different disciplines and communities and offer a platform on which to further cultural relations and provide solutions.

The work of Climate Connection reaches a global audience, and the British Council takes the opportunity to publicise its work at international events, most recently at COP27 in November 2022. During COP27, which was held in Cairo, members of the British Council took part in a range of activities. These activities included: hosting roundtable discussions with young climate activists and UK politicians such as James Cleverly, who was the then UK Secretary of State (SoS) for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs; running a dedicated Climate Connection booth to showcase the creative solutions for climate action designed by participants’ and co-hosting a session with the Department of Education and SoS UK to showcase the climate education policy (British Council, 2022). In addition to these activities happening inside the COP27 venues, the British Council engaged with publics across the world, putting on live COP27 simulation events in schools in Egypt, Northern Ireland and England. COP27 facilitated new connections between Britain and Egypt in the realm of climate change and the British Council claim that they are now supporting 15 new bilateral partnerships between universities to work on climate issues.

These activities centre young people and cultural connections in the fight against climate change and workshop innovative solutions on a
global stage. The UN Youth Envoy argues that allowing young people to participate in civic and political lives is essential to preventing future conflict and to building peace, and Climate Connection helps to do just that. One such example of how it does that is the Global Youth Letter which the British Council launched in September 2021. It was a call for action from young people around the world to the world leaders attended COP26 in Glasgow, emphasising the seriousness of the problems caused by climate change and how young people should be better integrated into the efforts to tackle it. 16 By involving young people in the fight against climate change through their cultural relations programme the British Council helps to pave the way for peaceful conditions for the future generations.

As in the 1980s/1990s, the British Council still facilitate science and research projects geared towards the tackling of global challenges, the difference is that now they are specifically constructed within the global challenges narrative. Under the Climate Connection umbrella, Creative Commission grants are allocated to projects aimed at exploring climate change through art, science and digital technology, in order to stimulate global conversations about the climate and inspire transformational change. For example, in 2021 the Responsible Innovation Plastic Project for Life and Environment (R.I.P.P.L.E.) was given funding from the Challenge Malaysia Grant. This was a joint project between the Biji-Biji Initiative in Malaysia and Falmouth University aimed at identifying meaningful design opportunities to escalate the value of plastic waste through product innovation, behavioural shifts and novel manufacturing.

The Water Initiative South Asia (W.I.S.A.) is another example of a British Council facilitated project that involves scientists in the pursuit of solutions to grand challenges. W.I.S.A. is a five-year project (2018–2023) that promotes science and research partnerships between the UK and countries in South Asia. It aims to investigate key aspects of water science in South Asia by bringing together scientists, decision-makers and managers of research institutions and corporations. The main themes of the project are defined as such: (1) health, water quality and sanitations, (2) water resource management, (3) transboundary water cooperation. In doing so the project contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which focuses on clean water and sanitation and brings together people from across the South Asian region to cooperate on essential issues.

Science thus remains central to British Council activities both in the realms of development and cultural relations. Science is a crucial and distinct method in the fight against global issues such as climate change, resource scarcity and disease. Additionally, scientific, and technological training can help to build up a country's industrial, institutional and educational capacity to deal with the consequences of a changing world.
Conclusions

Not only can science help provide solutions to the adverse effects of climate change, resources scarcity and global pandemics but science is historically a fruitful platform on which to forge international and transnational connections. The mutually beneficial nature of science and its perceived neutrality means that it provides common ground for communities around the world to build connections. This essay has shown various ways in which the British Council have utilised science as a soft power tool of cultural relations in the post-war era to facilitate peace and mutual understanding.

It has been acknowledged that certain bilateral relations encouraged by the British Council in the period after 1945 had their roots in colonialism. The uneven nature of scientific development in the latter half of the twentieth century meant that scientific-cultural relations with the ‘developing world’ often mirrored the asymmetrical power dynamic between imperial power and ex-colony (still often seen now in contemporary Global North-Global South relations). Policies must be implemented in the twenty-first century to overcome these imperial legacies (an example of such a policy can be seen in the Newton Fund’s insistence on match-funding with partner countries aim to reduce these dependencies and give power back to countries in the Global South).

These potentially unequal relationships, however, were forged as part of efforts to tackle scientific problems and facilitate peaceful global relations, albeit on Britain’s terms. While contemporary work by the British Council much more explicitly links global challenges such as climate change to international peacebuilding strategies, it is possible to see common threads throughout the British Council’s work since 1945. For example, efforts to facilitate transnational networks of actors through climate-based cultural relations in some way mirrors the early knowledge exchange programmes explored at the start of this essay, and of course the stated objective to engender genuine friendships and connections across borders has always been central to the British Council’s cultural relations.

The British council’s post-war science work contributes to peacebuilding in two main ways. First, in the promotion of global and cross-border friendships and channels of communication that ensure the maintenance of productive dialogues outside of conflict. Secondly, as issues such as resource scarcity,
future pandemics and global warming are seen as direct threats to peace, mobilising initiatives to counteract these problems counts as peacebuilding. Not only do issues such as these exacerbate the potential for regional and local conflicts but without assured supplies of food and water and security from natural disasters and pandemic-scale disease, communities around the world cannot live in peace. By tackling global challenges, science very clearly contributes to the British Council’s peacebuilding strategies and has done since the Second World War.
References


Correspondence from Professor Ifor Evans to James Crowther, 29th July 1941, BW 64/10, British Council Country Series: USSR, The National Archives, Kew


To find out more about cultural relations and peacebuilding, please visit: www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/research-series/cultural-relations

British Council 2023
The British Council is the United Kingdom’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational