

# CULTURAL RELATIONS, DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION IN AN AGE OF COMPETITION

As the international order becomes increasingly fragmented, a key question for Governments globally is how best to manage relationships in a way which minimises tensions and keeps open channels for dialogue and cooperation.

Cultural relations emphasise building mutual trust and understanding between actors from different countries as the basis for securing positive, mutually beneficial, long-term, and sustainable transnational relationships. New research commissioned by the British Council demonstrates how, in the current geopolitical climate, this approach builds a resilient platform for maintaining international dialogue and cooperation.

This research draws on twelve case studies of programmes selected from the portfolio of work being delivered by the British Council, the Goethe Institut, Institut Français, and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the US Department of State (ECA). The countries the programmes operate in reflect the diversity of conditions which can lead to challenges in maintaining international dialogue and cooperation, including Russia, China, Turkey, Indonesia and Libya.

The case studies confirm that cultural and educational activities can provide a shared platform for engagement and cooperation with Governments even when relations in all other areas remain challenging and can enable people-to-people and institutional dialogue and exchange to continue and thrive. They also advance understanding of how cultural relations can enable a diverse range of foreign policy objectives, even in contexts of weak or fraught country-to-country dialogue and cooperation. These include:

- Maintaining people-to-people connections and affording platforms for positive bilateral engagement between Government officials, even during periods of escalated bilateral political tension
- Advancing efforts to deepen bilateral engagement between home and operating country partners, including Government, by providing the expertise, reputations and relationships necessary to access and navigate the operating country environment
- Building trust in and understanding of the home country among a wide cross-section of the operating country population, by working towards objectives support for which supersedes societal divisions and polarisation, such as education and cultural heritage

To optimise the ability of cultural relations organisations to contribute to international dialogue and cooperation in the current context, it is important for them to learn from one another, to build an understanding of what works in specific contexts, and to establish positive working partnerships with stakeholders in their activities, including policymakers.

To this end, the research provides a number of considerations for organisations like the British Council to optimise their ability to establish, maintain and cultivate dialogue and cooperation. These considerations are addressed to two audiences: cultural relations practitioners and policymakers.

### To cultural relations practitioners:

- Ensure **core competencies** among leadership and personnel, in areas including local language proficiency, local and sector-specific knowledge and expertise, technical know-how in developing and delivering cultural relations programmes, and interpersonal skills, for example through recruitment, training and tenure
- Ground programmes in a thorough, **evidence- and expertise-based understanding** of the context, needs and priorities of the target audience and operating environment
- Cultivate a reputation that prompts potential partners both at home and abroad to recognise the organisation as an enabler of their own strategic objectives, for example by building a **strong track record for excellence and innovation** in its programming
- Continuously demonstrate commitment to the **professional and sector-specific values** defining key sectors, such as collaboration in the arts, a free and independent civil society, and knowledge exchange in higher education
- Invest in **long-term relationship-building** with partners both at home and abroad, within Government and across key sectors including the arts, education, and civil society
- Build these relationships using a cultural relations approach that emphasises successive engagements, the cultivation of **trust and mutual understanding and mutual benefits**
- Continue to focus on and innovate methods for delivering programmes that facilitate **direct contact and collaboration** between people from different countries

### To policymakers:

- **Enable cultural institutes (CIs) to remain in place over the long term**, so that they can continue to cultivate the competencies, reputation, and relationships necessary for them to facilitate positive international dialogue and cooperation
- **Distance cultural relations from politics**, to reduce the risk that flashpoints in the broader bilateral relationship will compromise the mission of cultural relations to build transnational trust and understanding between people
- **Avoid and counter simplistic, reductionist narratives** of and about operating countries and their citizens, both to limit the risk of flashpoints, and to reduce anxieties among partners about engaging with one another in dialogue and cooperation
- **Facilitate coordinated action between CIs and other home country stakeholders**, including Government departments and the private sector, to increase the scale, resources, and attractiveness of programmes
- **Identify and cultivate areas of mutual strategic interest** with operating country governments, in order to create a more enabling environment for CIs to engage in dialogue and cooperation
- **Leverage international conventions**, for example UNESCO conventions on protecting cultural heritage, to establish the legitimacy of culture- and education-based dialogue and cooperation with operating countries, both at home and abroad

For more information about the research, please see the [published report page](#).