

Cultural diversity, the common heritage of humanity

“As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.”

Article 1 of the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*
(Paris, November 2, 2001)

In October 2003, UNESCO set out to elaborate a proposal respecting an *International Convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions*.

The purpose of this initiative was to establish a legal framework confirming the right of States and governments to support cultural and artistic creation, production and dissemination.

This internationally recognized regulatory measure will make it possible to maintain and promote a variety of cultural expressions against a backdrop of growing globalization.

The *International Convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions* will officially establish that cultural productions and property require a special status different from the status of other products and services that are subject to gradual liberalization and more extensive trade.

The Convention will confer on States and governments the right to adopt cultural policies so that each artist may continue to create in his unique way.

Is culture a commodity?

“Cultural diversity is the appropriate response to the aspiration of peoples to develop in an environment in which all cultures can flourish. A genuine dialogue between cultures enriches humankind.”

Joint declaration by Line Beauchamp, Minister of Culture and Communications, and Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, Deputy Premier, Minister of International Relations and Minister responsible for La Francophonie
(Québec City, October 23, 2003)

We are living at a time of rapid market integration and accelerated development of the information technologies. Globalization is radically altering economies, lifestyles and cultures.

We recognize that free trade agreements have a positive impact on international trade, emerging economies, the standard of living of millions of people and indeed, on the advancement of democracy. However, such agreements are raising new concerns with regard to social justice the world over, worldwide environmental protection and the erosion of cultures.

We now know that globalization poses a genuine threat to cultural diversity. Major trade agreements tend to call into question government support for cultural products and services. This dynamic ultimately threatens various forms of expression, especially those that rely on the cultural industries for their dissemination, given that works that benefit from the dominant means of production, distribution and marketing are put at an advantage.

We note that the resulting imbalance puts at a disadvantage societies that preserve their identity and originality through public support for artists and cultural enterprises.

We reaffirm that cultural products are not ordinary goods and services. Failure to manage market forces will inevitably exacerbate the vulnerability of cultural expressions and lead to the worldwide standardization of culture.

A government commitment

“Quebecers form a unique society. We are proud of our language and culture, which we have nurtured over time on this continent despite our minority status. From this achievement stems a responsibility at once moral and historic to protect cultural diversity.”

Jean Charest, Premier of Québec
(Berlin, January 27, 2004)

Québec committed itself very early on among the nations that promote cultural diversity. In September 2003, it took an additional step in this direction by formally confirming, through a Cabinet decision, its adherence to this principle. It declared at that time that it:

- wishes to preserve its full ability to support culture;
- will not commit itself to restricting its cultural policies;
- supports the elaboration of a convention on cultural diversity.

Québec civil society has also mobilized along with the government. Since the late 1990s, groups of Québec cultural professionals have participated very actively in this debate. The Québec government supports their activities and maintains close relations with artists' and cultural workers' associations that belong to the Canadian Coalition for Cultural Diversity.

The Québec government has made the defence of cultural diversity one of its key commitments, which is reflected in:

- support for UNESCO in the elaboration of an *International Convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions*;
- a contribution to research on the demands and consequences of the implementation of this future convention;
- intensification of diplomatic initiatives among international interlocutors;
- support for the participation of civil society, especially the cultural and university sectors.

Worldwide mobilization

“We must struggle constantly since art and culture are essential to a society’s cohesiveness.”

Pierre Curzi, President of the Union des artistes and Co-Chair of the Canadian Coalition for Cultural Diversity
(preface to *Le Marché des étoiles*, Boréal, 2004)

In recent years, a growing number of governments, international agencies and non-governmental organizations have participated in the debate. Their intervention has bolstered the promotion and defence of cultural diversity.

In 1998, the Canadian Coalition for Cultural Diversity set itself the task of heightening awareness in society of cultural diversity issues. Established in Québec, it has since broadened its initiatives outside Québec and Canada. Similar groups have been established in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. They bring together professionals from the publishing, cinema, television, music, performing arts and visual arts sectors. These coalitions have a mandate to present their viewpoint to political officials in their countries.

In 2001, the 185 member States of UNESCO unanimously adopted the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which confirms that genuine intercultural dialogue is one of the best guarantees of development and peace.

In 2002, the International Network on Cultural Policy, an informal forum for the culture ministers of several countries, took a stand in favour of the proposed international convention to protect cultural diversity. The same year, at the Beirut Summit, the **Organisation internationale de la Francophonie**, which assembles nearly 60 States and governments that have in common the use of the French language, took a stand in favour of a regulatory measure governing cultural diversity.

In 2003, the European Union adhered to the principle of cultural diversity and recognized the need for a standard-setting instrument aimed at preserving and promoting such diversity. On October 17, 2003, the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference took a decisive step by giving Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura a mandate to submit in 2005 a draft *International Convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions*.

Preserving the world's cultures...

“But let us not forget that civilizations and cultures exist only where there are men and women to give them life .”

Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO
(preface to *Cultural Diversity: Common Heritage, Plural Identities*,
UNESCO, Paris, 2002)

The Québec government, through a unanimous vote of members of the National Assembly, regardless of political allegiance, has indicated its support for countries, nations, organizations and associations working to promote cultural diversity.

It unreservedly supports the principle of an international prescriptive measure that confirms the right of States to maintain, elaborate and implement policies to support culture and cultural diversity.

For this reason, the Québec government is delighted by the decision of the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference to initiate deliberations that are to lead, in 2005, to a draft *International Convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions*.

The question will arouse debate and Québec has already assured UNESCO of its unfailing support. This support is important since the concerted action of governments, organizations and individuals engaged in the defence of cultural diversity will contribute to the adoption of an effective legal measure recognized by everyone.

The same applies to the international community's ability to implement humane globalblization that recognizes the arts, literature, lifestyles and human values, the importance of protecting the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expressions, and which acknowledges the right of all societies to preserve the foundations of their identity while displaying receptiveness to other cultures.

Cultural diversity in real time

Keep abreast of new developments and subscribe to the *Bulletin de la diversité culturelle* by clicking on the address of the *La diversité culturelle en question* Web site.
www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca/international/diversite-culturelle

This brochure was produced by the
ministère de la Culture et des Communications

We would like to thank the ministère des Relations internationales
and the ministère du Développement économique et régional et
de la Recherche for their invaluable collaboration.

Creation and graphic design: duso Communication

Printing: K2 Impressions

Legal deposit: 2004

Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

National Library of Canada

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ISBN: 2-550-42639-8