THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SUSTAINABILITY

Estimated read time: 5 min

ON THE
GREEN
AGENDA
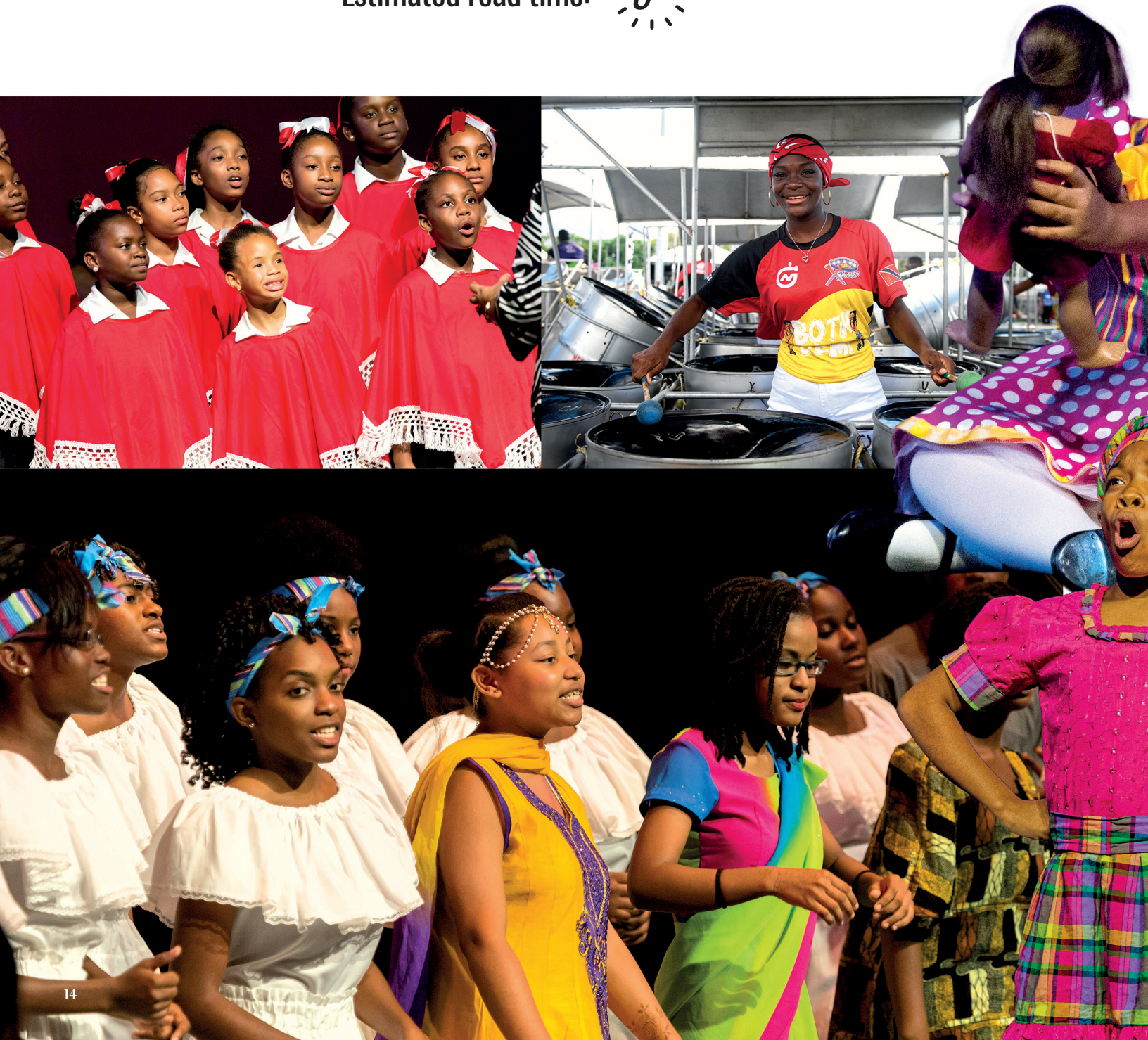
KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is increasing discourse around the linkage between culture and sustainability with a view to understanding how these concepts can be synergised to support sustainable development.

Scholars have suggested that culture should be a fourth pillar of sustainability, alongside the economy, environment and society.

Culture is important for defining and shaping identity and crafting the frameworks for social interaction and socio-economic wellbeing. Culture influences all aspects of society and is likewise influenced by societal changes. Sustainability is important as it ensures the present and future viability of society, the economy and the environment. In recent years, there has been increasing discourse around the linkage between culture and sustainability with a view to understanding how these concepts can be best synergised to support the sustainable development of people and the planet.

For almost five decades, NGC has supported cultural preservation in Trinidad and Tobago. NGC also espouses the principles of operational sustainability, and in recent years the company has taken deliberate steps towards further embedding sustainability into all aspects of its business practices and stakeholder interactions.

Dragonzilla, mascot of the NGC Bocas Lit Fest

CULTURE DEFINED

Culture is a ubiquitous concept, of which most people have a perception, but may struggle to define. The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity on 02 November 2001.

THE CONFERENCE REAFFIRMED THE DEFINITION OF CULTURE AS: "...THE SET OF DISTINCTIVE SPIRITUAL, MATERIAL, INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL FEATURES OF SOCIETY OR A SOCIAL GROUP, AND THAT IT ENCOMPASSES, IN ADDITION TO ART AND LITERATURE, LIFESTYLES, WAYS OF LIVING TOGETHER, VALUE SYSTEMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS."

From this definition, culture can be seen to have both tangible and intangible elements, which are integrated into the behaviours and norms of a particular group. The culture of a group defines and distinguishes it from other groups.

FOR EACH GROUP, CULTURE DESCRIBES ITS ACTIONS, MANNERISMS, AND VALUES, AS WELL AS THE ARTEFACTS AND SYMBOLS IT USES TO EXPRESS ITSELF.

THE LINK BETWEEN CULTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity alludes to the linkage between culture and sustainability and compares cultural diversity to biodiversity:

"AS A SOURCE OF EXCHANGE, INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY, CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS AS NECESSARY FOR HUMANKIND AS BIODIVERSITY IS FOR NATURE. IN THIS SENSE, IT IS THE COMMON HERITAGE OF HUMANITY AND SHOULD BE RECOGNISED AND AFFIRMED FOR THE BENEFIT OF PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS."

Soini and Dessein introduced a conceptual framework comprised of the following three representations of culture in sustainable development (Soini & Dessein, 2016), which can be used as a starting point for cultural and sustainability integration.

Culture In Sustainability
Sustainability is widely thought of having three pillars – economic, environmental and social. Soini and Dessein suggest that culture should be included as the fourth pillar of sustainability. In this model, culture is seen as capital possessing intrinsic value – culture for culture's sake. It complements the other pillars but exists independently, with emphasis on the tangible aspects of culture such as art, literature and heritage sites. Culture 'in' sustainability acts as an enabler for economic, social and environmental sustainability.

This relationship can be seen in aspects of the 'orange economy' where culture is developed as a product for social and economic trade. The NGC Bocas Lit Fest, which has been sponsored by NGC for 13 years is an example of culture 'in' sustainability.

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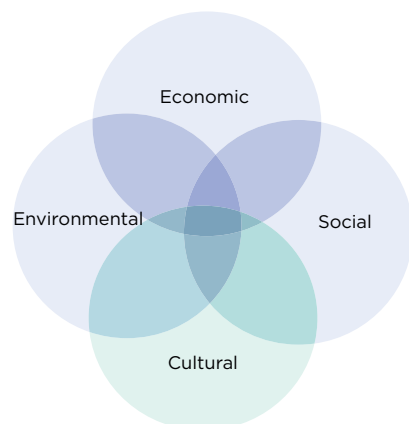
The festival grew from two award-winning writers in 2010 to 30 writers winning awards, book prizes or being shortlisted in the Caribbean, North America and the UK in 2023. The festival serves as a conduit for cultural development and preservation, knowledge exchange and career advancement opportunities for existing and emerging authors.

Other examples include the Tobago Blue Food Festival; the Tobago Heritage Festival; tours to culturally relevant communities such as Paramin; and of course, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival.
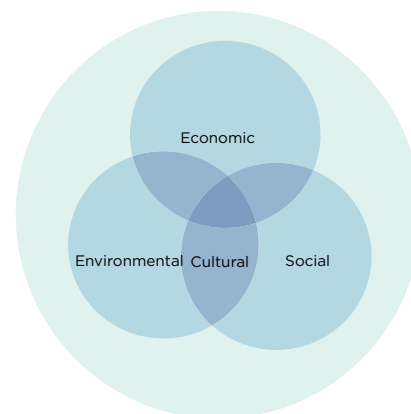
Culture For Sustainability
The second representation – culture 'for' sustainability – presents culture in a mediating role among the other three pillars of sustainability. Here, both tangible and intangible cultural resources are crucial for economic and social development. The implication is that cultural values should be considered in sustainable development policies.

CULTURE 'FOR' SUSTAINABILITY ALSO PLAYS A FOUNDATIONAL ROLE IN MAINTAINING PEACE AND SECURITY AS THE CULTURE IS CRAFTED IN LINE WITH SUSTAINABLE GOALS.
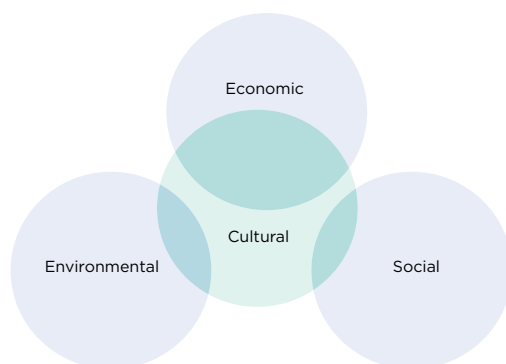
The advent of the local steelpan movement can be viewed as an example of culture 'for' sustainability. Having its genesis amid warring gangs, the culture of fierce yet friendly competition among steelbands emerged as a mechanism to achieve peace.
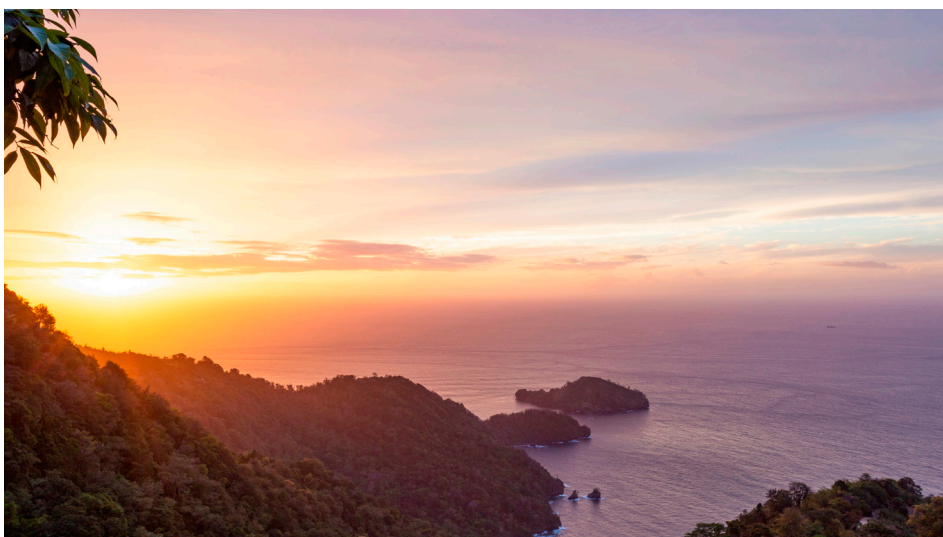

Culture As Sustainability
Soini and Dessein suggest a third linkage – culture 'as' sustainability – in which culture is fundamental for and fully integrated into the sustainability pillars. Under this structure, development is a cultural process, and society, the economy, and nature are constituent parts of the culture. Policy-making would be an integrated process that takes into account multiple dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The choice of model employed to assess an organisation's culture-sustainability relationship, will be influenced by the circumstances, values and goals of the organisation.

Culture and sustainability are complex and interconnected concepts that are always evolving, thus requiring dynamic monitoring and responsiveness. Integration of culture and sustainability has the potential to transform how organisations interact with their stakeholders, the economy, and the environment, as sustainability and the organisational culture become one and the same. ∎

View at The North Deck, Paramin, Trinidad and Tobago, W.I.

References
Soini, K., & Dessein, J. (2016, February 11). Culture-Sustainability Relation: Towards a Conceptual Framework. (M.-T. Albert, Ed.) MDPI, 8(167), 3.