Documents without Borders

For the Culture

Dory Shaffer

My frequent focus in these columns trends toward science, technology, mathematics, and engineering because I work as a librarian at a technological university where engineering is by far the largest program on campus. However, the world of international government documents is so much larger than the STEM scope I frequently write within. International agreements, declarations, and international governmental organizations (IGOs) whose mission is to protect and share culture proliferate. Culture, being one of human's most treasured attributes, is celebrated, researched by scholars and students, and sought out by many for personal enrichment. Outside of organizations/institutions promoting culture in the U.S., like the National Endowment for the Humanities,[1] many of these groups will benefit from international government information sources. In this column, I will discuss a few such organizations and institutions, including United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),[2] world heritage centers, and partner and regional organizations. I will also provide ideas for further exploration.

Among international cultural institutions, UNESCO stands out as a prominent force. UNESCO[3]—with its mandate to promote international cooperation in education, science, and culture—serves as a beacon for preserving cultural heritage and fostering dialogue among nations. Its initiatives encompass a wide array of activities, from safeguarding intangible cultural heritage to promoting literacy and education worldwide. UNESCO's online presence is quite robust, including their own library and data center.[4] Through this portal users can peruse many of the statistics and reports that go on to be used in academic research and media coverage on topics like freedom of expression, culture, and public policy. Further, in their CORE Data Portal,[5] one can look up transparency reporting, information that can be used to understand how resources are utilized and for what projects. Much of the data is available as user friendly maps and charts as well as downloadable formats for analysis.

In my view, at the heart of UNESCO's cultural endeavors lie the World Heritage Centers,[6] which play a pivotal role in identifying, preserving, and promoting sites of outstanding universal value. These centers serve as hubs of expertise, facilitating collaboration among nations to ensure the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage for future generations. Through initiatives such as the World Heritage List and the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, UNESCO fosters international recognition and appreciation of diverse cultural expressions.

Beyond UNESCO, a multitude of partner and regional organizations collaborate on cultural initiatives, each contributing expertise and resources to the global effort of cultural preservation and exchange. These organizations, often working in concert with U.N. organizations (I would be remiss not to mention U.N. Tourism[7]), tailor their programs to address specific regional challenges and opportunities. They can be regional IGOs like the African Union's Division of Culture[8] or smaller national organizations. Their cumulative effect of enriching the global tapestry of cultural diversity should not be ignored. On cultural issues, especially challenging ones, I recommend beginning with what is shared by those who practice the culture themselves as well as from more familiar organizations. These people are often in a "position to know," as information literacy researcher Mike Caulfield would say,[9] and have just as much or more authority to speak on cultural issues.

For scholars, students, and enthusiasts alike, international government information sources offer a wealth of resources for exploring and engaging with cultural heritage on a global scale. From databases documenting cultural artifacts to repositories of scholarly research on heritage conservation, these sources provide invaluable insights and perspectives on the diverse cultural landscapes of our world. To further explore the rich tapestry of international government information related to culture, individuals can delve into specialized databases like those mentioned here, consult publications from IGOs and partner organizations, and take things a step further by participating in cultural exchange programs facilitated by international institutions to learn from those who are in a position to know. By engaging with these resources—individuals can deepen their understanding of cultural diversity and contribute to efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage.

While my professional focus often gravitates toward the realms of science and technology, the world of international government information offers a vast and diverse array of resources for exploring and engaging with cultural heritage. From UNESCO's efforts to safeguard world heritage sites to the myriad initiatives of partner organizations, the available information is rich. By tapping into these resources, researchers,

students, and interested patrons can widen their perspectives on culture and all the aspects of life it impacts.

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Notes

1. National Endowment for the Humanities, 2024, https://www.neh.gov/.
2. UNESCO, 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en.
3. UNESCO, "Our Expertise," 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/our-expertise.
4. UNESCO, "Data, Facts and Figures," 2024, https://www.unesco.org/en/data-center.
5. UNESCO, "Core Data Portal," 2024, https://core.unesco.org/en/home.
6. UNESCO World Heritage Convention, "About World Heritage," 2024, https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/.
7. UN Tourism, 2024, https://www.unwto.org/.
8. African Union, "Division of Culture," 2024, https://au.int/en/sa/dc.
9. Mike Caulfeild, "Position to Know," *Analyzing Argument* (blog), July 11, 2023, https://mikecaulfield.substack.com/p/position-to-know.