

Cultural Mobility Forum 2027

“Reimagining International Cultural Relations for Cultural Mobility”

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Background paper

by Yohann Floch, Director of Operations — 8 October 2026

This Forum does not start from the premise that international cultural relations need a European fix, or that the so-called Global South is waiting for its instruments to be corrected. It starts from the opposite premise: that some of the clearest thinking, and some of the most durable practice, on what fair and reciprocal cultural exchange actually looks like is already happening across the world — often without any partner from the so-called Global North needed to legitimise it, fund it, or convene it. This Forum brings that thinking into the room as the starting point of the conversation, not as its afterthought.

That does not mean setting aside the imbalances that still shape so much of how international cultural cooperation is designed and funded. It means refusing to let those imbalances define the terms of the conversation. What follows sets out the diagnosis this Forum is built around, the principles we believe should guide a different architecture for international cultural relations, and the sessions through which participants gathering in Casablanca will test, challenge and build on all of it together.

A pattern visible almost everywhere

Look closely at international cultural cooperation almost anywhere it is formally organised, and a familiar pattern tends to appear: declared commitments to mutual benefit, diversity and partnership between equals, sitting alongside instruments, funding rules and institutional habits that quietly entrench the very imbalances that language was meant to dissolve.

Article 16 of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was written specifically to correct one dimension of this pattern, obliging developed countries to extend preferential treatment — in funding, in market access, in mobility — to artists and cultural professionals from developing countries. Two decades on, that obligation remains only partially honoured almost everywhere it applies.

This is not a story unique to Brussels, Paris, London or Amsterdam, nor is it new. A substantial body of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has long shown that cooperation built around exchange, dialogue and mutual understanding can just as easily entrench the inequalities it claims to dissolve. For much of its history, cultural diplomacy as practised by dominant cultural powers has functioned closer to an act of representation — telling one's own story to the world — than to a meeting of equals, and the imprint of that history still shows in who sets the agenda, who receives the funding, and whose mobility gets facilitated as a matter of course.



None of this is unfolding in a stable environment. Democratic backsliding, resurgent nationalism and sharpening geopolitical competition are placing fresh strain on arrangements that were already unequal, and the rapid spread of artificial intelligence adds a further, still largely unaddressed risk: that the infrastructure now mediating cultural visibility worldwide will flatten or misrepresent precisely the minority languages, non-dominant cultural expressions and living heritage practices that international cultural relations exists to protect. Public policy and institutional design, the ecosystems that sustain cultural and creative industries regionally, the networks connecting arts organisations across borders, the grassroots collaborations that artists and cultural practitioners sustain on their own initiative, and the digital and AI-mediated infrastructure now shaping all of the above are not separate concerns to be addressed one at a time. They function as a single system, and a Forum genuinely committed to reimagining international cultural relations has to treat them as one.

If the pattern above were the whole story, this would be a paper about deficits. It is not, because the most instructive answers to the questions it raises are not waiting to be invented; they are already being practised, tested and written about. South-South cooperation — between artists, organisations and networks that share neither a colonial history with one another nor a single donor to satisfy — routinely produces exactly the kind of long-term, trust-based relationship that Northern-designed instruments still struggle to fund: partnerships that predate the programme that eventually supports them, and that will outlast it.

As Ukhona Ntsali Mlandu argues in her 2023 text for *On the Move**, **solidarity, care, hospitality and mobility justice** are not values to be affirmed in a preamble and then left unexamined, but the actual terms on which ethical mobility should be built from the outset. This Forum treats that argument as a starting proposition for the whole gathering, not as the subject of a single session.

Compass for an alternative global dynamic

The first is horizontal partnership rather than institutionally led exchange. The most dynamic, generative and durable forms of international cultural exchange are not institutionally led or diplomacy led, but sector led, artistically driven and demand responsive, built on long-term relationships between artists, organisations and communities that often predate, outlast and operate independently of any formal programme or policy framework. Strategy design should follow that reality rather than compete with it. Non-state actors — artists, independent organisations, informal collectives and grassroots networks — are very often the ones sustaining international relationships in practice, long before and long after any state or institutional actor gets involved, and a different architecture should resource that leadership directly, rather than routing it through intermediaries whose mandate is representation rather than practice.

The second is demand-responsive rather than offer-led design, so that instruments respond to the priorities articulated by practitioners rather than the thematic and geographic priorities set centrally by funders.

The third is equity by design as a structural requirement, not an afterthought. Communities that remain structurally marginalised within existing frameworks — independent artists, grassroots organisations, practitioners from peripheral regions, minority cultural communities, disabled creatives, parents and carers, and Indigenous practitioners among others — need adapted funding conditions, accessibility standards, governance quotas and language-sensitive processes built into instruments



from the outset, together with cultural rights as an explicit foundation and a more distributed, participatory model of decision-making that On the Move describes as constellation governance.

The fourth is mobility that genuinely works in both directions, which starts with visa processes that facilitate rather than obstruct. However carefully the other three principles are designed into a programme, none of them survive contact with a visa process built around the assumptions of a different kind of traveller altogether: the late invitation that cannot be processed in time, the freelance status a consular system does not recognise, working conditions that look nothing like salaried employment. A different architecture has to treat this as a design requirement in its own right, not as an implementation detail to be solved later.

What the Forum will explore together

This Forum wants to name a necessary shift directly: from soft power to shared value, from offer-led programmes to demand-led instruments, and from cultural diplomacy as projection to international cultural relations as a form of democratic practice. Put together, this describes international cultural relations built on reciprocity rather than influence — one where value is created and recognised on every side of an exchange, not simply projected outward from wherever the funding originates.

Every session in Casablanca has been designed to test one or more of these principles against lived experience, rather than leave them as aspiration.

Whose infrastructure carries our culture

The opening plenary panel, *AI Reshaping the Conditions of Cultural Exchange*, will put these stakes to the test directly: how AI-driven platforms for content creation, curation and distribution are reshaping international cultural visibility, what this means for languages and traditions that barely register in the datasets shaping today's dominant models, and whether policy frameworks anywhere are equipped to prevent AI-mediated exchange from deepening the asymmetries it could just as easily help correct.

Cities as strategic partners

Cities of Exchange and Care will turn to a set of actors central to this Forum's principles but rarely treated as strategic partners in their own right: cities, which are simultaneously cultural programmers, diplomatic actors, talent hubs, places of refuge and communities of care, and whose capacity to play that role depends entirely on the frameworks put in place around them. This panel asks what city-led cultural mobility could become if it were resourced and recognised on a scale that matched its actual impact, rather than surviving as an under-promoted complement to national or international programmes.

Horizontal partnership in practice

Two long tables will take the Forum's first principle directly into lived practice. *South-South Mobility: Towards Horizontal Partnerships* will ask what genuinely peer-to-peer cooperation requires in practice, and what funding architectures, regional or international, help or hinder it, with insights from the Arab region and from stakeholders working across Africa-to-Africa cultural cooperation. *The Ethics of Cultural Mobility: An African Perspective* will ask participants to sit with a central challenge together: that mobility frameworks built with good intentions can still reproduce the very harms they claim to address, and that a genuinely different starting point has to be built collectively, not assumed.

Where the pattern still holds

Not every imbalance this Forum will name has already been overtaken by better practice, and the session on *South-North Mobility and Article 16* will hold space for the one that has proven most stubborn. Article 16 of the 2005 UNESCO Convention obliges developed countries to extend preferential treatment to artists and cultural professionals from developing countries; two decades on, that obligation remains only partially honoured, and nowhere is the gap between principle and practice more visible than in the visa process itself. This long table will put that gap in the room as lived experience — real stories of rejection, delay and mismatched assumptions — moving the conversation from individual stories towards a shared sense of which fixes would actually make a difference.

Protection as a precondition

Artists and cultural practitioners are creators, living heritage bearers, and holders and transmitters of culture, symbolic identity and collective memory; their ability to create freely, and to bear witness to the social, political and humanitarian realities of their societies, is a precondition for everything else this Forum discusses, not a separate concern to be addressed once the rest is settled. *Safety and Protection of Artists and Cultural Practitioners* will bring that reality into the room directly, asking what it takes — in policy, in funding, in solidarity between organisations — to ensure that artists at risk from armed conflict, persecution or political oppression can continue their creative practice and contribute to the cultural life of their communities.

Whose Forum this is for, next

And because none of the architecture this Forum imagines will matter if the next generation has no reason to trust it, *Emerging Talents Reviewing International Cultural Relations* will close the circle by asking the people who will inherit whatever this Forum produces. This long table will ask how digital transformation, mobility justice, climate concern and international instability are shaping their own appetite for an international pathway at all, and will work towards shared solutions that put equity and sustainability at the centre from the start, rather than retrofitting them once a career is already underway.

Towards Casablanca

This paper is informed by discussions with stakeholders across the field, yet it does not pretend to resolve any of the tensions it names. That is deliberately the Forum's work, not this paper's. What it offers is a shared starting point: a diagnosis that refuses to treat imbalance as inevitable, four principles that describe what a different architecture would actually require, and a set of sessions designed to test every one of those principles against lived experience rather than leave them as aspiration.

What international and local participants in Casablanca will produce together — the barriers named precisely, the fixes proposed, the models already working that deserve wider recognition and resourcing — will feed directly into the advocacy On the Move is already pursuing: the shaping of a new approach to international cultural relations that places the free and well-supported international circulation of artists and cultural practitioners at its centre — not as a privilege reserved for a few, but as a cornerstone of their professional pathway and their contribution to the world.

* Ukona Ntsali Mlandu, [An Invitation to Transform Your Vision of the Cultural Mobility Ethic from an African Perspective](#), On the Move, 2023.

