DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE
“HARNESSING CULTURE FOR DEVELOPMENT IN MONGOLIA”
UN House, Ulaanbaatar
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Speech by Ms. Sezin Sinanoglu, UNDP Resident Representative

H.E. Ms. OYUNGEREL, Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism,
Members of Parliament,
Distinguished Panelists,
Ms. Beatrice Kaldun from UNESCO Office in Beijing,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to our 6th Development Dialogue on ‘Harnessing Culture for Development in Mongolia’. I hope you had an enjoyable Tsagaan Sar and I wish you well for the Year of the Horse.

Like many species which hibernate during the winter, our Dialogue series has been in some kind of hibernation, but I am glad that with the onset of spring, the series is back and a number of events are planned in the next 2 months. The first being this Dialogue on Culture and Development.

A few months ago I attended the World Economic Forum consultations held in Mongolia and was impressed by the emphasis by many participants on the importance of cultural identity, cultural heritage and its impact on the future of Mongolia.

That got me thinking. What is culture? Is culture only something that is exotic and relates to a country’s past? Is it only tradition, is it static, and about maintaining the status quo? Or is it something vibrant and something that can contribute to a country’s economic growth and social development?

Following a little research and some contemplation, I’ve come up with three messages that I would like to share with you today.

The first message I would like to you give you is that culture, including indigenous traditional knowledge, is an economic and social asset and is an essential element of a successful economy. It is also an enabler and driver of progress and a fundamental element of sustainable human development!

Let me dwell on this for a few minutes.

Human development is all about expanding choices and opportunities so that each person can lead a life with dignity and create value both for themselves and for others. Support and respect to cultural diversity, understanding and exploring what others do and how they do it,
supporting creativity through the arts and investment in talent: all of these help increase people’s choices and access to ideas. They help people realize their social and cultural rights and access to opportunities. All in all, support, **respect and investment in culture is an investment in human development, it is an investment in human rights.**

Ladies and gentlemen:

Support to creativity and innovation in the arts, has impact beyond culture itself. **Creativity and innovation are also the foundations for technology and scientific progress.** Investing in the arts, creating a nurturing environment for exploration and innovation leads not only to beauty but also advances in utility, in productivity, in scientific research towards medicine and engineering among other things. I hope that this example serves to make the point, however small: have you ever watched Star Trek? A famous science fiction TV series that ran for many many years in the US. I hope you have because you will recognize some of the linkages between ‘the movie’ (a cultural expression) and the ‘technological advances’ that followed. Let me show you: IPAD.

Please download and watch Star Trek Next Generation that ran in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is about space travel and space exploration. I have no doubt you can find it on the web somewhere. But this very common tool that many of use and even depend on so heavily today, this electronic tablet is exactly what the crew of the spaceship had in their hands all throughout the series in the 1990s. I think that makes a point.

Let me mention another aspect of culture’s impact on sustainable human development: that is the **contribution of the cultural sector to the economy and poverty alleviation.** I’d like to draw directly from a think piece prepared by UNESCO on the Post 2015 agenda and note that “Cultural heritage, cultural and creative industries, sustainable cultural tourism, and cultural infrastructure can serve as strategic tools for revenue generation, particularly in developing countries given their often-rich cultural heritage and substantial labour force. Cultural and creative industries represent one of the most rapidly expanding sectors in the global economy with a growth rate of 17.6 % in the Middle East, 13.9 % in Africa, 11.9 % in South America, 9.7 % in Asia, 6.9 % in Oceania, and 4.3 % in North and Central America. Promoting this sector requires limited capital investment, involves low entry barriers and can have a direct impact on vulnerable populations, including women.” With this, who can doubt that culture is a strong force for economic progress?

Mongolia’s rich cultural heritage, and cultural and creative industries such as sustainable eco-tourism and cultural infrastructure can promote economic growth and employment. Mongolia is particularly well placed to benefit from this through promotion of tourism, art, music, and nomadic culture.

Finally, let me point out that there are very **strong linkages between culture and environmental sustainability.** Local and indigenous knowledge systems and environmental management practices provide valuable insight and tools for tackling ecological challenges,
preventing biodiversity loss, reducing land degradation, and mitigating the effects of climate change. This true for Mongolia, this is true for any culture so closely rooted in its natural environment.

Having gone through these linkages between culture and sustainable human development. **Let me now take you back to the other messages that I wanted to give.**

The second message I would like to share with you today is that while culture has undisputable positive impact on progress and advances in human well being, **we also have to put cultural practices in the right perspective and not accept all established practices blindly.** There is a danger to romanticize culture and imbue it with supposed greatness. Occasionally the reality is very different and we come across cultural practices that are downright abominable. For example, female genital mutilation is still common in many parts of Africa. We can hardly eulogize female genital mutilation as an example of great culture in any society in Africa.

Luckily not all examples are so extreme! The point is that whatever the case, we should always understand and at times question the impact of cultural practices on human development, progress and environment and look to see how they can be improved. An example:

Mongolian is nomadic and relies heavily on livestock. Rural land is communal and allows for grazing animals across regions and ecosystems. That practice served Mongolia very well for hundreds of years. But throughout those years the amount of animals were relatively few. Now you have more than 45 million livestock. A large number of those are goats. Goats have specific eating patterns. They eat the roots of plants. They eat tree saplings. Too many goats and uncontrolled grazing is degrading the pastures. It is causing loss of ecosystems. This is an economic and cultural practice that is fast becoming environmentally sustainable. Let’s look into how we can make it sustainable. Is it reducing numbers? Is it establishing new agricultural practices? Is it setting up new ways to manage communal land. I’m **not at all** proposing to change the culture, and I am not suggesting one solution, but I am proposing to find ways to ensure your nomadic lifestyle is sustained **along with** the nature that it depends on.

**My final (third) message is that culture is not immutable.** Cultural practices, value systems and way of doing things, all change whether it is due to internal or external influences. And they should. This was true in the time of Marco Polo who served as an Ambassador of both western and eastern culture. It is true now. Please allow me to give you an interesting example. I brought to you this wonderful book on Mongolian costumes. I hope that you will find and read it. But I would like to especially call your attention to the last part. We are so much under the influence of Hollywood or nowadays Bollywood. But did you know how much the Mongolians actually influenced Hollywood???

Influence and change is global and it is not always negative.

Social media, unheard of even 20 years ago, is now not just a means to share photos with friends and family. It exposes people to different cultures, ideas, views of life, experiences – in
some cases serving as a catalyst for people’s search for democracy and human rights, in others, exposing the huge differences that pull people apart, helping us better understand and address cultural norms that practices that can hinder progress and realization of basic rights. The Arab spring is an example of the first. Recent debates around the world around LGBT rights can be an example of the second.

Let’s embrace change, explore ways to direct it to constructive and positive explorations that promote human development and the realization of human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that this Dialogue and the discussions that we have today, contribute to promoting and advancing Mongolian culture for sustainable human development in Mongolia and beyond.

I would like to thank all our panelists and the British embassy in Mongolia for being a strong and reliable supporter of this Dialogue series; to the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism for being the national partner for today’s Dialogue, and especially to Minister Oyungerel for being receptive to our initial idea of organising a Development Dialogue on this topic; to UNESCO for enthusiastic support and to Beatrice for changing her travel plans at such a short notice to be here with us today; and to the Ministry of Economic Development for ownership of the entire series.

I hope the debate and the exchange of views today, both during the panel discussion and the open discussion afterwards, will generate ideas for building strong linkages between culture and development in Mongolia.

Thank you.