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Urban vitality and cultural ecology. The Agenda 21 for culture: the years ahead

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Urban vitality and cultural ecology. The Agenda 21 for culture: the years ahead?

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As the Agenda 21 for Culture is celebrating its fifth anniversary on 8 May 2009 it is a good moment to congratulate by reflecting on the new international context the Agenda finds itself in. This text is suggesting some worthwhile areas for activities, reflection, research and partnerships in which the three hundred cities and regions who currently make up the global community of the Agenda 21 for Culture might want to involve themselves in the years ahead as a critical catalyst. Together they might make a difference for cultural ecology.

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What makes the Agenda 21 for culture so appealing is the fact that it argues for a solid centrality of culture in urban policies and that it offers the opportunity for each city and for local governments to create a long-term vision of their specific cultural development strategy. The content of the Agenda 21 addresses five essentials of sustainable human development, Culture and human rights, Culture and governance, Cultural sustainability and territory, Culture and social inclusion, and Culture and economy. If the interplay between those five dimensions is orchestrated in a thoughtful, intelligent and visionary way, this contributes substantially to the true wealth of nations and to the wellbeing of children, women and men.

The protagonists of those cities and regions who have committed themselves with the Agenda 21 for culture can be proud of the promising first five years. Together, they managed to fill the big gap which was not even perceived as such at the Rio Earth Summit 1992, when the Agenda 21 for Sustainable Development was conceived and adopted, leaving the cultural dimension in a limbo. They started a bottom-up process when the gap continued to persist even after the Review Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002. However, as part of this summit, a promising international high level conversation about cultures of sustainable development gained some visibility. Organised jointly by UNESCO and UNEP, a roundtable discussed issues such as the invisible role of biodiversity for economic, social and cultural well-being and the development of cultural diversity, issues which were to be continued one year later when the drafting and the negotiations of an international legal instrument on cultural diversity started officially. Thus, in comparison to the ecological movement and to the peace and human rights movement, the issue of culture as a global public good entered the international scene as a late-comer but with vigorous energy.

The Magna Charta for International Cultural Policy

With the 2005 UNESCO Convention in force since March 2007 and currently ratified by 97 Member States and the European Community (as of April 2009), its governing bodies have been fully established by now. Ratifying this Convention with light speed made its entry into force an unprecedented success in the international community. Substantial operational guidelines on i.a. international cooperation, the role of civil society, options for preferential treatment for better balancing the exchange of cultural goods and services internationally, new partnerships and on the modalities of the International Fund for Cultural Diversity are likely to be adopted in June 2009. The global community who successfully advocated a solid centrality of culture in strategies of sustainable development has thus already made the transition from negotiating and campaigning to the planning and implementing stage of this new international legal space. The task ahead is bringing this UNESCO Convention to life in everyday practice. This needs orientation, analytical baggage and clear action points.

The next five years will be very important for a strong and visible start and for developing joint practice how to best promote the diversity of cultural expressions. The Convention can, should and will play a major role as a catalyst for international cooperation in the field of culture. It is in the process of being established as the 'Magna Charta for International Cultural Policy'.

How this will happen will largely depend on the political will, skill and resolve of the State Parties. It will especially depend on their capacity to engage in meaningful and substantial cooperation with all stakeholders, including artists' organisations, cultural producers and managers, festival organisers, civil society platforms, intermediary foundations, research organisations and universities, cultural and creative industries, development agencies and the public at large who enjoy the wealth of artistic activities, culture and creation. Regarding the public at large, solid knowledge and data about cultural participation and access to meaningful diversity of cultural expressions are very important in order to gain a better understanding of the impact of public support schemes e.g. for public cultural infrastructure, workspaces and mobility schemes. Hence it is vital for critical cultural policy research to also look into data and case studies on non-participation in cultural life. It is equally important to pay attention to activities of new or so-called informal cultural actors who might invent new and different types of artistic and cultural action, using and managing informal spaces, skilfully playing with a mix of face-to-face and cyber communication.

Prospects of Cultural Diversity

Assessing the state of public policies for cultural diversity involves last not least municipalities and regions, and the State level in the case of Federal States. In countries like Germany or France municipalities and local entities bear a very important share of the public funding for culture (e.g. for the year 2007, the overall nationwide public budget for culture in Germany was 8,3 Billion €, 14,7 % of which came from the Federal Level, the larger States (like Bavaria, North-Rhine Westfalia, Lower Saxony) contributed 32,6 %, the City States (like Berlin, Hamburg) 8,7% and the municipalities the remaining bulk of 44,0 %). This important breakdown of the budget share figure is not always visible for and understood by the broader public. However, these cultural tasks are mostly voluntary and not compulsory for the municipalities, hence might be put at jeopardy in times of crises.

Local governments and cities are important stakeholders for promoting and protecting the diversity of cultural expressions.

Local governments and cities are important stakeholders for promoting and protecting the diversity of cultural expressions. Their possible role in the global governance of Culture is changing as a result of the new legal space created by the 2005 Cultural Diversity Convention. Although the Convention does address the local governance level explicitly only in three or four paragraphs, most provisions relating to the Rights of parties at the national level (Article 6, Article 4, paragraph 6), the Measures to promote (Article 7) and to protect (Article 8) cultural expressions, Information sharing and transparency (Article 9) as well as Exchange, analysis and dissemination of information (Article 19) and last not least Education and public awareness (Article 10) are addressing the core of cultural policy realities at the local and regional level. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, a critical re-appraisal of cultural policy traditions is needed. How conducive are the public cultural policies in place for promoting the diversity of cultural expressions? Whose diversities? How to organise the public dialogue and the accountability? Who will accommodate conflicting interests and design the decision making? Here organised and committed cities and regions willing to invest in some research and good case studies can take important steps which might make a big difference for the prospects of cultural diversity over time.

While municipalities and regions clearly are very important partners in the democratic governance of diversity, as enablers of creativity, and as providers of public cultural infrastructure, successful public policies for cultural diversity are the cumulative combined result of a broad range of actors. Cultural policy involves several line ministries, usually up to six or seven, combines diverse modalities of public funding, recognises the need for regulatory frameworks usually on the national level regarding taxation, work permits, educational and cultural services, social security schemes for artists and cultural producers etc. as well as the support for diversity in the media and for broader public awareness. Hence the challenge for the Agenda21 for Culture regions and municipalities to work out a very clear understanding of their own place and space of action and develop their strategies accordingly.

Cultural Liberty and Cultural Diversity

Cultural liberty has been suppressed through history and continues to be so. The human rights record continues to be mixed: According to the estimates of the 2004 UNDP Human Development Report, approximately 900 million people – one in seven people in the world – belong to groups that face some form of suppression of language, religion, or discrimination based on their ethnicity or religion in employment, schooling, and in political life. UN human rights bodies and research institutes should consider preparing another Human Development Report on Cultural liberty to be released in 2014 in order to reassess and review these figures one decade later; interested cities and regions might join such an exercise providing case studies and disaggregated data.

Over the last twenty years, there has been a major evolution regarding the measurement of the state of development. The Human Development Indicator, launched in 1990, has quickly become a key benchmark, more recently developed further into the concept of Sustainable Human Development Indicator. OECD has begun to include a chapter on “the quality of life” in its annual fact books since 2007, starting to give more detailed data on the relations between culture, economic prosperity and quality of life. A number of indicators have also been developed in order to better assess the state of inequality in a given society as for instance the GINI indicator and others.

In a medium-term perspective and to monitor results efforts in the area of culture and development, including notably the implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention, the (Sustainable) Human Development Indicator should be developed further, elaborating its Cultural Diversity dimension or coupling it with a *Cultural Diversity Indicator*. This approach could give a boost to the implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention in one of its key areas, i.e. the principle of the complementarity of economic and cultural aspects of development (Principle 5, Article 2). Such an approach must include by also go beyond a mere Statistical Framework for Data Collection on cultural activities, goods and services.

Cultural Diversity 2030 - Forum Under40

Capacity building for the next generation of cultural professionals is an important field of action which can be tackled immediately. In 2007, the German Commission for UNESCO initiated the Under 40 process which offers young experts– postgraduates, PhD students, young and mid-career professionals, and similarly qualified experts – the opportunity to participate in the international debate on Cultural Diversity and the implementation of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression.

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Based on a Call for Contribution and Participation a core group of European participants for the programme strand 2008-2010 has been identified, followed by a global call in winter 2008. The U40-World Forum aims at including excellent professionals, future decision makers and communicators from all world regions. Among the successful candidates identified in March 2009 are cultural policy managers of cities and local governments as well as researchers on urban sustainable development and integration.

The U40-World Forum will be held back-to-back with the Conference of Parties of the 2005-UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression in June 2009 and includes the option to participate as active observers in the Conference of Parties. Convened by the German Commission for UNESCO and the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity as a project of UNESCO's Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity, the programme has become viable thanks to the support of a broad range of governments and other partners from universities and foundations.

If this initiative turns out to be successful, this type of capacity building should become a periodical activity, building a cumulative U40 fellow network in the process. Every second year in conjunction with the Conference of Parties, a U40/U30 programme could be prepared by a task force with relevant international networks, involving a team of National Commissions for UNESCO, the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity, UNESCO Chairs and Agenda 21 for Culture networks as fit.

Exploring broader and more inclusive alliances for cultural diversity

The overarching objective of Agenda 21 for Culture is to raise the quality of life and to promote sustainable ways of urban living. The urgency of sustainable development derives from the limits of the natural environment and from the limits of social, technical and cultural innovations to meet present and future needs.

There are interesting new data and case studies from a couple of sources which call for a reappraisal of the Agenda 21 for Culture strategy from several angles. To give only a couple of examples: Recent OECD data shed new light on the dynamic role of a relatively limited number of regions with strong innovative potential and strong interaction among each other which drive both the gross national product and the development of the world economy. Case studies like “Cities of the South” focus on citizenship and exclusion. Case studies on the vitality of biodiversity in larger urban areas commissioned recently by the European Commission in Brussels revealed surprising facts. In contrast to common sense assumptions, the vitality of flora and fauna in large urban areas as e.g. Berlin is much higher than in the surrounding countryside which is mostly exploited for industrial style farming. This points to the need for more research on the state of biodiversity in cities and regions and on the invisible role of biodiversity for economic, social and cultural well-being and for the development of cultural diversity.

In 2008, UNCTAD together with UNDP released for the first time a Creative Economy Report in cooperation with UNESCO, the International Labour Organisation and the International Trade Centre. These data from all specialised UN agencies give strong evidence of the catalytic role of the creative sector for development, a role which had remained rather invisible hitherto. Specific thematic networks as e.g. the UNESCO Creative Cities, Cities of Design, World Book Capital and others develop their city profiles around this dimension. Many of the cities involved are active partners of the Agenda 21 for Culture as well. While some major cities and regions have already started mapping the state of their creative sectors, relatively little is known about the interplay between cultural policies for cultural diversity, the emergence of a vibrant creative economy and the more general features of dynamic regions mentioned above.

Last but not least a new type of connecting rural-urban networks is evolving as a second-generation-initiative of organic and biological farming organisations. These networks promote a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between cities and their surrounding regions, including the urban-rural interplay. UNESCO biosphere reserves and world heritage sites, including cultural landscapes, might also be considered in this perspective.

Cities and regions promoting the Agenda 21 for Culture may create useful synergies when reaching out to the protagonists of those likeminded networks, also to avoid overstretching of a naturally limited number of staff in local governments and municipalities who are in charge of those issues connected with global public goods. As said, some more nuanced research work might be required before being able to make well informed and proper choices.

Worthwhile action, reflection, partnerships and research for Agenda 21 for Culture – some proposals

URBAN PUBLIC SPACES

- Harnessing the fruits of cultural diversity in municipalities: networks of major European Cities as well as Global Creative City networks can become active in developing further their local policies for Cultural Diversity, i.e. through five major North-South-South projects.
- City twinnings may pledge to engage in a ten-year-programme for building strategic cultural policy capacities and for developing cultural industries, including a Under40 dimension.
- The Intercultural Cities programme of the Council of Europe and the European Union began its work in 2008 with 12 pilot-cities, involving the Eurocities network as a second strand. If this leverage model proves successful it could be used for other activities as well, including on a international level beyond the region of Europe.

LIFE LONG LEARNING, PUBLIC AWARENESS, PARTICIPATION

- Promoting the Magna Charta in the artistic community: Cities and regions hosting major cultural festivals like Berlinale, the Medellin festival of literature, FESPACO Ouagadougou, the Cannes festival, the Venice film festival, the Salzburg festival, the Shanghai Biennale, Pop.komm Berlin and many others could make it a habit to offer a bibliophile edition of the text of the 2005 Convention in one of the six UN languages and the local languages as a welcome present to all artists invited. If implemented on a sustained basis, by 2014 some ten thousand artists from 150 different countries might have received these booklets and learned about its contents.
- Promote the diversity of cultural expressions for children and youth: Cities hosting major international book fairs (Frankfurt, Cairo, Madrid, Johannesburg, Harare, Santiago) could team up with the World Association of Book Publishers and support local publishing initiatives for children's books and audio books, modelled on Public Broadcasting Service experiences.
- 21 May, the World Day of Cultural Diversity, lends itself as a popular day for municipalities and local governments, schools, neighbourhoods, youth centres, bookshops, libraries, cinemas and discotheques, churches and mosques, to organise celebrations of cultural diversity, story telling festivals, song contests, public viewing, soup readings, displays of design and many other low budget grassroots activities, etc.
- The international network of UNESCO Chairs for Culture and Development, with University Chairs in disciplines as divers as International Law, Cultural Management, Political Sciences, Anthropology, Arts and Culture, Design, Master of Business Administration, Music, History of Natural Sciences, Philosophy, History, Psychology and others, could consider convening a travelling International Summer School on Cultural Diversity Studies every other year. The cities and regions committed to Agenda21 for Culture could join forces and take turns in hosting this summer school.

SECOND LIFE, SCREEN LIFE, PUBLIC VIEWING

- Where possible and relevant, cities and regions can support a changed culture of television programming and public viewing of Public Service broadcasters, re-organised around principles of cultural diversity. As a result, young kids and teenagers would enjoy much more interesting and culturally diverse content in radio and TV, in a broader diversity of languages, while getting new and more realistic ideas about the lives of kids in Asia-Pacific, Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Arab world.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY INDICATORS - EXPERT KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

- National, international and local cultural policy and creative industry observatories should be organised and encouraged to develop meaningful indicators and case-studies to monitor results of local (and other) cultural policies and to accompany the implementation of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. In a medium-term perspective, a linked up trans-national Observatory consortium could be built as part of the implementation structure of the 2005 Convention.

WORLD.WIDE

- The creation of “Fair culture” labels might become a trade mark in North-South and North-South-South exchange and co-production schemes, replicating the success story of Fair trade at the beginning of this century. Big music stores and shopping malls for electronic equipment might start offering a gourmet corner with “slow food” cultural products and services from the Global South.

CULTURAL LIBERTY FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

- Following the example of UNESCO’s cooperation with International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX), a global network of 71 organisations working to defend and promote the right to free expression, a likeminded group of international Human Rights and Development Organisations could be approached to set up a similar alert system for violations of cultural liberty.

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In conclusion, this new international environment offers many interesting opportunities for embarking on cooperation for a truly balanced global cultural exchange and an interesting threefold challenge:

- The challenge of a *new architecture* of intergovernmental co-operation in the field of culture and development, an architecture of *global governance* with clear objectives and a legal space to assure public cultural policy and public responsibility for cultural diversity in the short, medium and long term. This includes the responsibility to bring this Convention to life, with the help of, and also despite of, the often slow and tedious procedures of multilateral consensus building and negotiating among its soon more than hundred Parties. And, *for the European Commission*, to comply with the obligations of being Party to a UNESCO Convention for the first time in its history.
- The challenge *for Civil Society*, to get its act together and create appropriate task forces to take stock of measures needed to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions within their territory and their different levels of governance as e.g. the regions and the municipalities and to engage in a structured partnership at the international level, including with the Intergovernmental Governing Bodies of the Convention.
- The challenge to use this *new cultural space of inter-continental dimensions* inscribed in international law actively and proactively. Quoting Rasmané Ouedraogo, President of the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity, there is a “Sixth Continent” emerging, a continent of cultural diversities, a Common-Wealth-To-Be.

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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