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and Cultural Change

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United Cities
and Local Governments

GLOBAL TASKFORCE
OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS
FOR POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA
TOWARDS HABITAT III

"Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire."

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). "A New Refutation of Time," Labyrinths (1964).

Agenda 21 for Culture and
Cultural Change

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Cultural change is a process by which cultures transform over time. Such a process can be slow and gradual, or it might be sudden and dramatic. Its causes may be singular or multiple. All cultures are predisposed to continuous change and, at the same time, resist change; certain dynamic processes inspire the acceptance of new ideas, while others simply encourage the continuation of a fixed stability and the maintenance of existing cultural structures and systems. Those who have key vested interests in the current cultural structures generally resist major change; those outside existing systems or visionary leaders are most often the supporters of change.

When viewing the time span since the inception of the Agenda 21 for Culture, there have been significant variations to the ways in which culture in our society is created, distributed and consumed. Although many of these began earlier than 2004, some of their manifestation and effects have only taken substantial hold during the last decade. A review or updating of Agenda 21 for Culture and any arising recommendations to cities to modify their cultural policies and approaches should take such developments into account. In this short article, I summarise briefly a few of the main cultural transformations that we have been witnessing, and then suggest how Agenda 21 for Culture might be re-conceived to have greater impact, bearing in mind current trends and developments.

> In this short article, I summarise briefly a few of the main cultural transformations that we have been witnessing, and then suggest how Agenda 21 for Culture might be re-conceived to have greater impact, bearing in mind current trends and developments.

The obvious impact of recent technological development on cultural processes is indisputable. This includes the far-reaching effects of digitalization and phenomena such as the extraordinary growth of distributive capacity, search engines and participatory and social media. The capability for information capture and sharing of all kinds, in the forms of, for example, wikis, open source communities and online metaverses has been striking. In parallel, the sophistication, portability and relatively low-cost of the increasing large variety of electronic devices used globally by a very diverse range of publics for both personal and professional use have had dramatic effects

on patterns of communication and information transfer. Technological advancement has not only profoundly shifted processes and patterns of cultural consumption, but also has eliminated the traditional distinctions between the roles of consumers and producers of culture. In some cases, technology has transformed the very nature and practice of creativity and cultural disciplines themselves, resulting in varied new cultural forms, such as the development of 'twitterature' (a new style of literature using Twitter), the nature and ease of making, uploading and watching films on social media platforms (72 hours of video are uploaded to You Tube every minute in over 60 languages), and new artistic forms based on new refined means of remixing, mashup, and multitracking (examples such as Glitch Pop, Bootleg, Cut-ups).

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Another cultural shift is being provoked by profound changes to the demographic profiles of creators and consumers in different cities. Fluctuations connected to age distribution, educational level and migration movements are having a deep influence on cultural practice, taste, interests and connections. Certain countries have been experiencing penetrating migration and refugee flows most clearly evidenced in cities, for example, where the proportions of 'native-born' and 'immigrant-born' residents have substantially altered in the past generation. Immigrants are a heterogeneous population and include both highly educated and very skilled individuals drawn by the explosive growth in knowledge-intensive and specialist sectors, and poorly educated, semi-skilled or unskilled workers, sometimes drawn by service sectors or low-wage employment. The cultural impact of migration therefore varies from place to place, but can have a profound influence on cultural behaviours. Certain groups of migrants may be quickly integrated into a new culture, while others only ambivalently embrace and, in some cases, actively reject processes of acculturation. These phenomena, combined with intermarriage and complex practices of adaptation and integration over several generations have resulted in the emergence of new hybrid or multiple cultural identities and transcultural interests and competencies, which influence approaches to cultural inclusion and forms of cultural engagement.

As civil society becomes mobilised and interconnected, cities have become more responsive and reactive to public views, offering citizens a conspicuous and more powerful role in influencing decisions in relation to culture and other municipal services.

Another factor that impacts directly and indirectly on cultural provision is the state of the economy, which may result, for example, in the increasing or cutting of public expenditure as a consequence of the economic restructuring that is taking place in many countries. Since 2008 in Europe, processes of spending reviews aimed at rebalancing deficits are having significant consequences for public services and public spending, both at the levels of state governments and local authorities. This is widely viewed as not simply a temporary phenomenon, but rather a structural economic change that is affecting entire political and social systems. In Europe, the welfare state model that was built over the last fifty years is moving to a different form, with an increased emphasis on the privatization of state assets and added incentives for market growth, including the sectors of culture and creative industries. Cost cutting of state and municipal budgets for culture has taken many forms including, in some places, a dramatic decline of subsidies to cultural organisations and innovative cultural practices. The cultural sector has responded to reductions in public subsidies through a combination of strategies, for example by decreasing their own expenditure, advancing new marketing strategies to increase earned revenues, developing more popular artistic and cultural programming to increase ticket sales, and creating additional partnership strategies to attract more private donations and sponsorship. However, this latter strategy has been quite unsuccessful since the private sector has also reduced its spending on supporting culture. The reduction of financial resources has generally generated a negative effect on the weakest parts of the cultural system, such as the youngest generation of creative professionals, small independent cultural organisations and on projects that promote experimental works and pioneering artists. Many believe that the current negative impacts on culture, in part due to reductions to state and municipal budgets for culture, will be long-term, and might only be overcome through radical changes to the existing traditional governance, management and financial models of our current cultural system. In addition, a new style 'multi-scale' approach is emerging based on close cooperation and joint working at many different levels, which is becoming more trans-sectorial and international in scope. This trend in governing culture should be taken into account in any reconsideration of Agenda 21 for Culture, including the search for new models of cultural governance and an assessment of their impact on core values and principles.

In view of all these shifts, developments and transformations, a review of Agenda 21 for Culture is certainly timely and appropriate.

It should be noted that different effects may be occurring in certain economies where there has been rapid exponential economic growth, rather than a decline, and where there has even been dramatic increase, and not decrease, in spending on culture, sometimes evidenced by the rapid building of large-scale cultural infrastructure, Where there has not been an equal investment in cultural 'software' (such as support for developing creative talent, visionary and effective management systems, education and training), the longer term consequences of new large cultural constructions have been problematic in both financial and cultural terms. In the same

vein, when national or local spending policies are altered quickly to meet a new set of cultural priorities, without taking into account effects on the overall cultural system, the positive results in certain areas of development are frequently mitigated by negative outcomes in others, leaving untold damage and a weakening of the overall cultural structure.

Another major change relates to the 'blurring' of different boundaries that historically have been attributed to culture. Divisions between certain cultural disciplines (for example, music, theatre, visual arts, film) are no longer clear; distinctions between 'professional' and 'amateur' quality have become ambiguous; and the understanding of the means of 'participation' in culture has been significantly widened. Also of profound cultural significance is the ground-breaking impact of video games on popular culture, for example, through online and LAN (local area network) gaming, which is leading to the rise of new subcultures and a defining of different cultural narratives.

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The marked divide between for-profit and not-for profit cultural organisations, commercial and non-commercial activity, and private and public culture has become imprecise. Commercial cultural organisations use profits to create non-profit foundations, and public institutions frequently embark on commercial activities such as the sale of merchandise, online distribution and catering to generate new streams of revenue. Open systems are beginning to replace closed systems, and the processes of cultural creation are increasingly incorporating new styles of partnering, networking and collective working, which are themselves leading to the growth of new forms of innovative organisations, such as creative clusters, fab labs and spider groups.

Enhanced meaning should be given in the framework of Agenda 21 for Culture to culture as a 'process'. Emphasis should be placed on the notion of "the creative ecology".

Since Agenda 21 for Culture is largely aimed at cities and local governments, any future reconsideration of the Agenda's principles and approaches should also to take into account shifts that are taking place in the role and governance of cities in certain parts of the world. The dynamics and respective power relations have altered in many countries between municipal, regional, national and sometimes also supra-national systems. In certain countries, processes of decentralisation and changes in taxation systems have almost reversed the respective prominence of state and local authorities in the cultural domain. With regard to cultural policy and levels of per capita cultural spending, the standing and power of certain cities now exceed those of the state in some countries. Internationally in the cultural sphere, cities play a progressively important global role and are networked transnationally, without any formal involvement of state authorities.

The systems and models of managing cities are also adapting to new circumstances in order to achieve greater efficiency, value and accountability. As civil society becomes mobilised and interconnected, cities have become more responsive and reactive to public views, offering citizens a conspicuous and more powerful role in influencing decisions in relation to culture and other municipal services. The limitations of historic forms of representative democracy at both local and national levels are being increasingly recognised; governance models in some cities are being adapted to become more participatory; further involvement to citizens in decision-making are being offered, and access to a wide range of networks and platforms are being attained by groups that were once marginalized or ignored by political structures. In future-oriented discussions about local cultural governance, there may be an enlarged focus on the principles and methods of achieving greater transparency and inclusion, with experimentation with different forms of institutional partnership models.

Culture is certainly a structural component in the broad architecture of sustainability in the widest sense, the notion of 'ecosystem' communicates the idea of interdependence, interaction, synergy and symbiosis.

In view of all these shifts, developments and transformations, a review of Agenda 21 for Culture is certainly timely and appropriate. Although there appears less need to fundamentally examine the core principles that underpin Agenda 21 for Culture, for certain cities, the current document is perceived as being theoretically and practically too wide in scope, and therefore lacking in focus, leading to reduced impact when implemented on the ground. Personally, I would argue for a conceptual updating of both the principles and approaches that are identified in published documents in order to take into account cultural shifts and changes since the launch of the Agenda 10 years ago.

Additional importance and meaning should be given to the significance of interrelationships and interconnections within culture, but also between different systems; there is a need for greater integration between diverse policy areas, of which culture is one. Equally, enhanced meaning should be given in the framework of Agenda 21 for Culture to culture as a 'process' where different elements of culture interact, and where a cultural system emerges that has clear interrelationships with other systems. Emphasis should be placed on the notion of "the creative ecology", especially within cities, where cultural systems should become integrally linked to economic and social systems. Culture does not operate 'in parallel', but is entirely intertwined and enmeshed in other systems and structures, which are mutually reinforcing. Although culture is certainly a structural component in the broad architecture of sustainability in the widest sense, the notion of 'ecosystem' communicates the idea of interdependence, interaction, synergy and symbiosis. A systems approach to culture seems both appropriate and a useful analytical framework for a future oriented approach to development and progress.

Increased prominence in a review of Agenda 21 for Culture should be given to the value of effective governance processes in culture, highlighting innovations and successful practices.

Increased prominence in a review of Agenda 21 for Culture should be given to the value of effective governance processes in culture, highlighting innovations and successful practices, and in particular two aspects. The first would be new approaches to the formulation and implementation of cultural policy at a municipal level, and also its interrelationships with the state policy, the market and the actions of civil society. There have been profound changes taking place with regard to processes of decentralization, privatization and partnership. The second would be improvements to the steering and supervision of cultural organisations themselves and to cultural networks at a city-level. There is a significant need for adaptation as a result of changing cultural paradigms to the roles of governing boards, and to the nature and practice of culture itself. Many cities are witnessing a gradual withdrawal of the direct management of cultural facilities and organisations, to enable new creative forces to take increased responsibility. This will require novel approaches to monitoring, evaluation and supervision, and a reform to certain practices for selecting cultural leaders, which should in future be based explicitly on clearly defined skills and competencies.

The future Agenda 21 for Culture would benefit from an accompanying 'toolkit' comprising regularly updated working documents with examples of how to set realisable objectives, along with proposals for applied indicators, measurements and timescales.

More emphasis should also be placed on diversity, learning and adaptation as key drivers of creativity. Advanced thinking in connection with the actual practice and implications of agreements to protect cultural rights and entitlements at local levels should become a pressing topic for reflection. There are also a number of topical technical issues that may need to be reviewed, such as the principles behind and approaches to different forms of creative ownership, intellectual property and copyright, arising partly from dramatic developments in digital communications technology and its impact on creative industries.

Databases of key reference and policy documents generated by cities should be maintained, and analysed to draw out common issues and determine trends. Case studies could be collected and categorised. A peer-to-peer mentoring system might be established.

For Agenda 21 for Culture to have greater practical impact, further consideration should also be given to fundamental requirements for the concrete delivery of established principles. The future Agenda 21 for Culture would benefit from an accompanying 'toolkit' comprising regularly updated working documents with examples of how to set realisable objectives, along with proposals for applied indicators, measurements and timescales to appraise the operational delivery of the Agenda. Additional focus on follow-up measures might take the form of offering

more constructive and active support to cities. I do not propose any form of formalised statutory monitoring, but rather a constructive process of evaluative and collective learning. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) are in a unique position to build a strong knowledge base of cultural practice in its member cities, based on an updated Agenda 21 for Culture, in order to promote more active exchange of experience and mutual learning. Databases of key reference and policy documents generated by cities should be maintained, and analysed to draw out common issues and determine trends. Case studies could be collected and categorised. A peer-to-peer mentoring system might be established. Using new technologies and available software, such practices are neither onerous nor expensive, and could make a valuable part of a global toolkit of local cultural development.

A wider knowledge community related to cultural policy and practice in cities should be encouraged by UCLG, which should take a leading role in helping to join together other partners, associations and alliances with an interest in the cultural development of cities.

A wider knowledge community related to cultural policy and practice in cities should be encouraged by UCLG, which should take a leading role in helping to join together other partners, associations and alliances with an interest in the cultural development of cities and those who subscribe to principles behind Agenda 21 for Culture. From this standpoint, UCLG might wish to expand the membership of its culture committee, with new categories open to those who deliver and promote culture in cities (including networks, associations of artists and cultural rights activists), as well as to those who have a wider role in cultural advocacy and development. Establishing a community of practice for those interested or working in the field of culture in cities would enhance the knowledge value chain in culture and actively promote innovative practice tied to Agenda 21 for Culture.

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