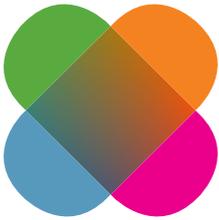


ARTICLE



BASMA EL HUSSEINY

WE NEED CULTURAL RIGHTS FOR ALL



3rd edition
INTERNATIONAL AWARD UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21



BASMA EL HUSSEINY

The cliché that the world has become a small village due to advances in communications technology is usually used to manifest how human beings are today more connected than ever, especially with the widening use of social media. I argue that despite of the great progress in communications over the past century, and also the major positive shift in awareness and consciousness that resulted in the creation of the first universal ethical code that is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the ensuing structures and agreements that seek to put it into effect; despite these huge achievements, we see today a very divided world in terms of the distribution of wealth and access to basic services. It is also important to note that despite the increased virtual connectivity, physical mobility across countries has become more difficult than ever with the restrictions imposed by rich countries against incoming visitors from poorer countries.

Almost one fifth of the world's population of 7.6 billion people live in slums, refugee camps and other forms of informal settlements that lack all or most basic services such as water, sanitation, protection against extreme weather conditions, access to health services and schools. This part of the human

population is by large located in developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

The economic and social disparities between rich and poor countries are striking. According to a January 2014 report¹ by Oxfam the 85 wealthiest individuals in the world have a combined wealth equal to that of the bottom 50% of the world's population, or about 3.5 billion people. An October 2014 study by Credit Suisse also claims that the top 1% now own nearly half of the world's wealth and that the accelerating disparity could trigger a recession. Another Oxfam report² in January 2018 said that 82% of the global wealth generated in 2017 went to the most wealthy 1%.

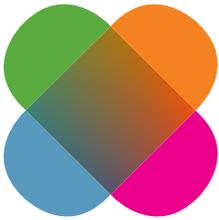
But during the past two decades in particular, war is perhaps the strongest factor that divides humanity, at least in the region I belong to, the Arab region. This region has become the battlefield for the World's most conflicting powers and ideologies and the gold mine for arms producing companies.

The costs of these wars are striking: more than 10 million refugees³ from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South

¹ <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/bp-working-for-few-political-capture-economic-inequality-200114-summ-en.pdf>

² <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year>

³ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>



3rd edition

INTERNATIONAL AWARD UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21

Sudan and Palestine; almost 2 million dead since 2003 from Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Tunisia; hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, an unknown number of armed terrorist groups; an unknown number of foreign military bases; more than \$150 billion spent by Arab countries on armament in 2015⁴ alone while more than 100 million people live under the line of poverty of \$2.5/day⁵ in this oil rich region.

Economic inequality and war are in my opinion the two most eminent dangers to the future of humanity. Their costs are too expensive for humanity to bear; their impact goes far beyond the hard facts: fatalities, refugees, famines and malnutrition, illiteracy, epidemics and mortality rates, etc. The deepest and most lasting impact is depriving the human race of most of its potential for progress. The waste of human talent and intellect caused by wars and poverty is a real danger to future generations.

In all the universal efforts and discussions to mitigate the negative impact of these two factors, one most important topic gets very little attention: arts and culture. Communities that suffer from war, poverty, violence and social marginalization can easily fall into despair. They feel that no one notices their agony, and that the only relationship they can have with others is that of waiting to receive help. The ability of these communities, and the individuals in them, to create and enjoy art, puts them on the giving end of the equation. They can create something that other fellow humans might need and enjoy. They will continue to be victims of wars or economic exploitation, but they now have the power that art gives, the power to imagine a different reality than the one they live in; the power of hope.

<http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

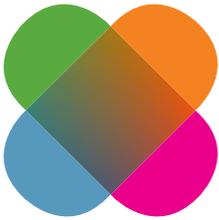
⁴ <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/EMBARGO%20FS1604%20Milex%202015.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/indicator/poverty>

Making the case for culture as the corner stone of social change has become a Sisyphean effort in a way. Despite the many arguments made by artists and cultural activists, often supported by real stories and evidence, it seems that the logic that poor and distraught people need art is totally incomprehensible to policy makers, politicians, economists, and above all; the media. There is a deeply rooted conviction among leaders, even the most progressive ones, that the ability of creative expression and the desire to enjoy art are exclusive to the ruling classes, and are not necessities for poor countries and communities. It is rather frustrating to witness how many times international conventions and organizations fail to recognize the significance of arts and culture as the most important fields of human activity where values and ideas are discussed, criticized, and created, and how this can help address the root causes of inequality, exclusion, violence and conflict. This failure is manifested every time an international plan or convention is announced and we find out that arts and culture is hardly mentioned, and that if it is, it comes right at the bottom of any list of topics or fields.

It is therefore paradoxical to note how artists and writers are a primary target for authoritarian regimes everywhere. If art is so unimportant, why imprison artists and ban their work? The examples are many: from Osman Kavala in Turkey to Bobi Wine in Uganda, artists and cultural activists are put behind bars, theaters and galleries are being closed and poems and songs are banned. Freedom of expression is increasingly becoming a privilege for rich people and nations. Sadly, it seems that only tyrants are able to recognize the role of arts and culture, or at least the subversive aspect of this role.

Art, in its capacity to discuss, criticize and create



3rd edition INTERNATIONAL AWARD UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21

ideas and values, has many roles: it gives people tools and platforms to analyze their reality, articulate concerns, express and examine doubts, form and conclude convictions and beliefs, extract substantial facts and generalize, and of course, always, enjoy life. This last role is largely overlooked in the rare cases where the role of art gets public attention. Why is life enjoyment seen as something that is not necessary for the needy and excluded, when billions of dollars are spent on its pursuit everyday by the rich?

UNESCO tried to address this shortcoming in its 2005 Convention⁶, especially in article 13 that states: "Parties shall endeavor to integrate culture in their development policies at all levels for the creation of conditions conducive to sustainable development". However, there are very few examples of successfully implementing this article among the 145 countries that ratified, accepted or accessed the convention.

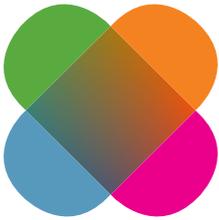
More advocacy is certainly needed, not only on the top levels of policy making, but also among those we assume are "converted", colleagues from other civil society sectors, youth movements, freedom fighters, and most of all, among those whose interests we as artists and cultural activists are seeking to protect. The notion that art is a luxury for those who can afford it, deprives poor and marginalized communities of the most effective weapon they can use for social change. The money that developing countries spend on building fancy opera houses and empty national galleries in capital cities, is taken from the programs and the spaces that every slum, refugee camp and village should have to enable and promote free creative expression. This is where art plays its most essential role: to turn the difficulties

we encounter and the horrors we witness into a genuine questioning of injustice, oppression and violence. This is also where people who suffer the most can discover joy and can regain their ability to connect with others. For people living in such communities, the majority of humanity, art is transformative, dynamic and essentially subversive.

This is not exactly a call to abandon prestigious concert halls and fancy international festivals, and go work only in slums, villages and refugee camps, but we can all recognize that such communities do exist, and acknowledge that the people who live in them have exactly the same need for, and ability of artistic expression as those who live in middle class neighborhoods and rich suburbs. In a sentence: we need Cultural Rights for all. In fact, this is what the toolkit "Culture 21 Actions" of United Cities and Local Governments very rightly promotes.

The international community has the choice of not recognizing this, but then we will have to continue to build more walls, to subscribe even more strongly to fear and conspiracy theories, and then to continue to be poorer and less safe. Poorer not only in material wealth, but as a result of depriving our societies of the wealth of art that can be created and enjoyed by those we choose to ignore, and less safe, even with all the billions spent on security measures, because safety means more than our immediate physical escape from danger. Safety also means the safety of our future as intelligent and compassionate human beings. We cannot be rich or safe unless we find the strength, deep inside ourselves, to challenge our reality and stretch our imagination to see the world we would like to live in, and create it.

⁶ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001429/142919e.pdf>



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THE OBJECTIVE OF THE “INTERNATIONAL AWARD UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21” IS TO RECOGNISE LEADING CITIES AND PEOPLE THAT HAVE DISTINGUISHED THEMSELVES THROUGH THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO CULTURE AS A DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. ON 7-8 MAY 2018, THE JURY COMPOSED BY FARIDA SHAHEED (PRESIDENT), CATHERINE CULLEN, LUCINA JIMÉNEZ, EDUARDO NIVÓN BOLÁN, AND EDUARDO VÁZQUEZ MARTIN, HELD ITS LAST MEETING FOR DELIBERATING ON THE DESIGNATION OF A CITY AMONG THE 99 CANDIDATES AND A WINNING PERSONALITY. THE JURY DECIDED THAT THE “INDIVIDUAL AWARD” BE SHARED EX-AEQUO BY BASMA EL HUSSEINY AND PATRICE MEYER-BISCH. THE AWARD CEREMONY TOOK PLACE IN MEXICO CITY (MEXICO) ON 18TH OCTOBER 2018.

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