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UCLG Committee

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CULTURAL POLICY IN CONDITIONS OF INEQUALITY

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Cape Town has garnered numerous international plaudits for its natural beauty, the quality and range of its gastronomy, its arts and design scene and its world-class convention centre and other similar facilities.

But it is also a city of rampant and stark inequality.

The city's Atlantic seaboard has the most expensive real estate and the highest concentration of multi-millionaires in the country.

Yet, less than 40 kilometres away, on the other side of the iconic Table Mountain, lies the sprawling township of Khayelitsha, home to more than 600 000 – mostly black – of Cape Town's four-and-a-half million inhabitants.

COVID-19 has highlighted the disparities in the city.

The relatively wealthy live in spacious apartments, houses on large properties, townhouses in gated communities, so that 'social distancing' is possible whereas many who live in one-room shacks in Khayelitsha,

do not have the luxury – and in a time of a pandemic – the basic necessity of physical distance. With thousands unemployed and living below the poverty line, alcohol-based hand sanitiser would not feature on a shopping list for basic needs. At least twenty-percent of Khayelitsha's population have to walk 200 meters to access water so that regular handwashing is just about impossible for them.

Little wonder then that the recent spike in coronavirus cases in the city has been sharpest in Khayelitsha.

While post-apartheid South African citizens now all have the same fundamental human rights enshrined in the Constitution, they do not enjoy these similarly in practice. The middle-class is able to buy better education, buy private security, buy excellent health care, while the poor have to make do with the generally shoddy services provided by the state. The educated and resourced can move around freely in private transport, participate in cultural life by visiting museums, go to the cinema and purchase tickets for contemporary theatre and dance. They exercise freedom of expression

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through online blogs, letters to newspapers, social media posts and they do it in the dominant language of English, with access to data.

Structural inequalities contribute to parallel worlds in which fundamental rights and freedoms are distributed unequally, and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts is a privilege for the “more equals” among us.

Cape Town, and indeed, South Africa where 10% of the population earns 60% of the national income while the bottom 40% have to make do with 7% of the national income, is a metaphor for the world polarised by inequality, with all of the resultant social consequences and potential conflicts.

Culture is the other major faultline in our world, in our country and in our city. The different belief systems, different values, different traditions that inform our ways of life impact on how we act, how we relate to others, how we confront a pandemic.

South Africa has faced a health emergency in our recent democratic past, with HIV/AIDS having accounted for an average of 1000 lives per day for at least a year, during the reign of Thabo Mbeki who succeed Nelson Mandela as president. Today, the global HIV epidemic continues to be highest in South Africa, with than 7,7 million people (more than 20% of the 15-49 year-old population) living with HIV.

Inequality also breeds culture. Too little work has been done on the impact of poverty on people’s mindsets, on what they come to believe about themselves, on their values and beliefs and on how these

proscribe their social mobility. People who encounter existential threats on a daily basis – through disease, through food insecurity, through criminal and domestic violence – confront the current pandemic in a different way (mostly through lack of options) to how more resourced people are able to deal with it. They now also have to deal with an army and police force sent into the townships to enforce the lockdown in conditions that fundamentally militate against it, so that inevitably, there have been unnecessary assaults and deaths at the hands of soldiers.

At this particular time, it is the people of Cape Town – rather than the City’s bureaucracy - who have responded best to the crisis and its impacts particularly on the poor. People in wealthier suburbs have formed networks to twin their areas with less resourced townships, bringing in food, sanitisers, masks and other basic necessities at this time. With the schools being closed, many children have lost the one meal per day that they would have received at school. A young theatre activist has established a theatre space in Khayelitsha without any government assistance, and has now converted its programme from teaching the performing arts to children, to providing nearly 300 children with a daily meal, with food provided by residents from the suburbs.

In a city, a country and a world as divided as ours, there cannot be one-size-fits-all ways of dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, just as there cannot be a one-size-fits-all cultural policy. If inequality defines so fundamentally the way in which human beings, citizens experience and practice

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their cultural rights, then – given that the middle class has the means to pursue and enjoy their cultural rights – one of the most important obligations of city governments – particularly in the global south - is to address inequality, and how this both determines access to and participation in culture on the one hand, and in how it impacts on people’s beliefs, values and worldviews and their resultant attitudes to life.

For while we reflect on the devastating economic, social and human impacts of COVID-19, we should be at least as concerned by the real and future threats posed by the human-made pandemic of inequality, by those who have little to lose.

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UCLG AND ITS CULTURE COMMITTEE
DO NOT NECESSARILY SHARE THE
VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE.

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