



# culture 21

Agenda 21 for culture

Cultural life, local life

**ALFONS MARTINELL**

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## Cultural life, local life

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### **Abstract**

This article posits the search for new perspectives for local cultural policies in light of the challenges of different contemporary crises, as well as the effects of globalization which lead us to a rationale with a focus in human rights and cultural rights. The Special Rapporteur's work<sup>1</sup> in this area and the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by many countries in 2008 provide an ideal setting for associating cultural rights and proximity. The right to participate in cultural life cannot be understood without analyzing its close relationship with local life, which has to regain its principles in order to become a fundamental place for exercising human rights. The current reality requires greater active participation from local powers as key actors in guaranteeing citizens' rights to cultural life. Rebuilding and reestablishing the principles of proximity policies is the political duty required of local governments by society. Likewise, there is a call for breaking away from non-transparent situations, corruption and populist clientelism to progress toward greater participation of the population in their cultural life in a favorable setting with a democratic local life..



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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/SP/Issues/derechosculturales/Paginas/SRCulturalRightsIndex.aspx>

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## Cultural life, local life

After decades of analysis and debates on the changes in contemporary society, the different crises which have appeared with the chaos in financial markets and the loss of prestige of democratic representation, have demonstrated some unforeseen perverse effects of globalization. If the economic dimension, the high mobility of people, the flows of goods and capitals of globalization, etc., have been analyzed from some positions, how these changes require updating fundamental rights as an articulating axis of a new way of coexisting in interdependence and in the communication society has not been contemplated sufficiently.

Many analysts demonstrate the crisis of governability of nation states due to their impossibility of controlling and directing collective affairs as well as due to the large influence of a new relocated capitalism, located in an undefined place of the planet far from the traditional logics of the limits of territory, authority or legality. As Manuel Castells said,<sup>2</sup> the state is too large for local and excessively small for global as can be observed or detected in our everyday lives. It all seems to indicate that we are now in the light of a real globalization (not rhetorical) which is characterized by the loss of certain essential values of the democratic system of the twentieth century, without a noticeable replacement for the population on a local and worldwide scale. Certain global problems (poverty, violence, inequality, employment, education, peace, etc.) do not evolve positively and the population begins to doubt the efficiency and ability of the system to respond to these new scenarios.

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The magnitude and repercussions of these problems, in worldwide governance, have produced a gradual shift and a neglect of the concerns for local life; understood as a place for exercising citizenship and the search for solutions to people's real problems. In this hierarchy of priorities we can interpret a certain depreciation of the potentialities of localness as a place for contribution and response to the difficulties of contemporary life in our societies. This uncertainty shows an obvious loss of confidence in local policies and their consideration as a driving force of development in the light of the challenges of our globalized societies.

**The local life is the best place for exercising citizenship and the search for solutions to people's real problems.**

Culture is not foreign to these phenomena and requires a reinterpretation of its function in a context which is characterized by different crises that urgently seek a change in perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Castells, M.: "The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. 1: The Rise of the Network Society." Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1996

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A first approach to this analysis requires an inevitable reference and reflection on human and cultural rights, like shared basic values, and contemplates an update to contextualize the relations between individual, community and culture at present. The statement, “everyone has the right to freely take part in the cultural life of the community, enjoy the arts, and participate in the scientific advances and the benefits obtained from them,”<sup>3</sup> in all of its possible extension and application, allows us to establish an essential relationship between this right and the local area where it can be accessed and defined.

We incorporate the contributions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)<sup>4</sup> which recognizes “the right of everyone to take part in cultural life” as an expression of the place where this right can be exercised in interaction with others.<sup>5</sup>

If we focus our attention on the concept of cultural life, we immediately observe the social representation of proximity, community, social group, society, etc., and if we direct it spatially, the idea comes to mind of public space, neighborhood, town and city. That is, cultural life that can have many dimensions and levels is closely related to the local experience. From this perspective we can affirm, and tradition will support this, that the space for better development of the full exercise of the right to participate in cultural life is in local life.<sup>6</sup> The problem is posed of how to articulate this principle with the structuring of policies and governance that guarantee these full rights.

## Cultural life that can have many dimensions and levels is closely related to the local experience.

We can describe cultural life as a first level of social functioning of a group or community integrated in a city or country, where the people share different activities that are expressive, creative, symbolic, traditional, etc. It can also be understood as the result of social interaction to satisfy basic and cultural needs in relation to others.

The expression “cultural life” refers explicitly to the nature of culture as a vital, historical, dynamic process which has a past, a present and a future.<sup>7</sup> Cultural life is the representation of the expression of a social group, a community or a society that occurs between the tradition and collective memory to the contemporaneity of a moment and certain place.

Cultural life is built as a result of bottom-up dynamics where the proximity of local life is the first level of individual and collective action which is expanding according to dynamics of expansion and extension that currently reach more easily even at a global level.

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<sup>3</sup> UNITED NATIONS. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Paris, 1948

<sup>4</sup> UNITED NATIONS. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966. Article 15, 1.a.

<sup>5</sup> The analysis done by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in General comment No. 21 (2009), which recommends: “The full promotion of and respect for cultural rights is essential for the maintenance of human dignity and positive social interaction between individuals and communities in a diverse and multicultural world.”

<sup>6</sup> Closely related to principles 3 and 4 of UCLG Agenda 21 for Culture: [www.agenda21culture.net](http://www.agenda21culture.net)

<sup>7</sup> UNITED NATIONS. General comment No. 21. Geneva: CESCR, 2009.

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On the other hand, the reflections on the central human abilities by Amartya Sen<sup>8</sup> and Martha Nussbaum<sup>9</sup> provide us with key content for analyzing the potential of cultural life in the generation of abilities which influence human development and welfare as a fundamental element of reflection.

## **The reflections of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum demonstrate the potential of cultural life in the generation of abilities which influence human development and welfare.**

These two dimensions link basic rights with human development, converging in local life as an ideal place for their implementation and practice, where basic needs and cultural needs can generate synergies which promote development and complete fulfillment of people, communities and societies. These dynamics can be evaluated by some of the following factors:

- Proximity helps detect problems of the population with more precision and find ad hoc solutions in a complex environment where there are no general models for different situations.
- Building citizenship from coexistence and the consideration of belonging to a group or community is connected to the experience of respect and guarantee of cultural rights, where both dynamics find conditions for their development in cultural life.
- The right to take part in cultural life assumes that there is an environment of freedom and independence of the people to satisfy, decide or choose their cultural needs in contact with others as a first level of development of a community or society. Therefore, the atmosphere of freedom and independence is a substantial factor in sustainable local development.
- Among the different processes which influence creativity and innovation, it is important to remember the atmosphere or environment of proximity, the availability of capabilities as the levels of individual and collective freedom in cultural life. These favorably influence the most intangible aspects of social change.
- Cultural life can be considered a great laboratory of social interactions which have an important influence on community life and in political participation as a key element of democratic life.

## **The right to take part in cultural life assumes that there is an environment of freedom and independence of the people to satisfy, decide or choose their cultural needs in contact with others as a first level of development of a community or society.**

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<sup>8</sup> SEN, A. Development as Freedom. Barcelona: Ed. Planeta, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> NUSSBAUM, M. Creating Capabilities. Barcelona: Paidós, 2012. She proposes 10 basic capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one's environment

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The values and potentialities of local life are sufficiently tested and well-founded on different treaties, documents, proposals, recommendations, etc. But in reality they find great difficulties in articulating the political agenda of national governments and in the international future in terms of development,<sup>10</sup> which are projected more at a national level than at a local level. There is certain resistance to accepting that in the local area these functions can be delegated for some of the following reasons:

- Despite certain grandiloquent proposals on local policies and their function in terms of responding to the problems of the population, as well as their potential in human development, they do not possess enough commitment (importance) in general public policies which do not consider local issues a crucial point to reaching their final goals. This fact can be understood as a result of tendencies toward conserving power in higher structures and/or resistance to effective decentralization.
- We have to accept and seriously review the current problems of local governance which require a critical analysis of its weaknesses.
  - Mistrust of local governments in assuming their competences due to inefficiency, corruption, clientelism, lack of transparency, etc.
  - Little economic ability to assume autonomous daily management of cultural life and respond to basic problems
  - Lack of competence in governing structures of local public authorities as well as well as other agents of civil society and the private sector
  - Excessively paternalistic role of the government, lack of autonomy: culture of centralism
- The major approaches to public policies, built on a general, unitary logic, do not consider in depth the complexity of local realities which are distinguished by their diversity and difference. Local realities require, due to their characteristics, their own answers built on the basis of a dialog between context and territory of each one of them. Localness, as an expression of its context, requires an ideal response from politics to its realities through the meeting between ascending/participatory dynamics and processes of general structuring at a national level. This is what Edgar Morin characterizes as expression of the complexity of our contemporary societies.



**The values and potentialities of local life are sufficiently tested and well-founded on different treaties, documents, proposals, recommendations, etc. But they find great difficulties in articulating the political agenda of national governments and in the international programmes.**

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<sup>10</sup>An example can be observed in the MDG and in the post-2015 agenda

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- The set of these situations makes somewhat of a vicious circle between mistrust or inability in localness to assume its function of cultural development with guarantees, together with the tendency of the system toward centralization which causes a loss of effectiveness of local structures. This process means not using the theoretical potentialities of localness in development which discredits local dynamics as a place to invest in giving answers and guarantees on human and cultural rights, as well as managing cultural life as a fundamental element of development and wellbeing.

These situations require a new generation of public policies where there is a new balance between national and local functions. A new social pact with the population and cultural agents to intelligently and innovatively situate the most adequate way of achieving democratic goals of guaranteeing the right to participate in cultural life and the possibility of living in conditions of development and wellbeing in independence and freedom. To this end it is necessary to build new proposals and suggestions for considering local cultural life a place for citizenship and response to new needs of the contemporary population.

## We need a new generation of public policies where there is a new balance between national and local functions.

A reflection on the relations between the right to participate in cultural life, sustainable development and local governance, as fundamental axes of contemporary context, they allow us to note some lines of action for creating synergies and overcoming some of the following difficulties:

- **Promote the generation of abilities in the local area** as an essential element for maintaining and expanding the potentialities to decide the destination of its own development. From internal dynamics of participation which create and retain talent with the external contribution of knowledge transfer.
- **Modernization of local governance structures** in administration as in other social and cultural agents which influence culture.
- **Build control and mentoring systems of effective decentralization processes** based on supporting the full assumption of its own legal competences. Currently public policies with local influence require support, consulting or knowledge transfer to more efficiently resolve problems of local life and expand the horizons of cultural development.
- **Generation of independent structures** that guarantee basic rights and compliance with existing legislation through information and transparency. These processes must contemplate active citizen participation which contributes to improve the perception of politics by the population.
- **Prioritize education and the incorporation of youth** into the different levels and expressiveness of cultural life. Updated training for the population requires priority attention, especially to the more socially vulnerable groups for their incorporation into the cultural life.



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- **Integrate the treatment of the transversality of culture**, breaking away from excessive structural departmentalism, as a conceptual framework for working on the different interdependences that local life has with development and culture. A new mentality that is more modest<sup>11</sup> at the service of different social movements of current society effectively accepts the complexity of the ways of improving the wellbeing of the citizens.
  - Despite globalization and the existence of major cultural content on the Internet or the reality of social networks, we have to **consider localness as a privileged place for “live” culture**. The value of sharing with other, in proximity and “contact,” a part of the cultural collective life aids the construction of the perception of belonging and the establishing of new cultural identities in our cities as spheres of multicultural confluence.
  - The construction of modern citizenry requires major **cooperation processes between individuals, groups and communities** which are produced spontaneously but also from ways of understanding management of the public space and ways of local governance.<sup>12</sup> Cultural life is structured on the basis of major processes or flows of cooperation in different dimensions, directions and ways by which an enabling environment may influence the creation of a “cultural climate”<sup>13</sup> as an essential element for development of this ecosystem of relations between culture and localness.

For these reasons we consider that it is no longer time for declarations, proposals and strategies, but for continued work in responding to the needs of citizens by searching for adequate solutions for the particularities of each territory. A new proactive attitude which has to be founded on a change of mentality where the generation of local capabilities and the delegation of local power with independence find synergies with control and monitoring mechanisms to look for solutions to the problems of our societies through the applications which are closest to the population; in the proximity of localness of our globalized world.

A new role for localness in the cultural life of our globalized societies requires breaking away from old localist positions which have been shown to have major difficulties in constructing a future with greater participation from the population in the affairs which have to do with how we are listening in the demonstrations in the streets of many cities of our planet. It is time to respond and interpret the message for the good of human and democratic rights.

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<sup>11</sup>As recommended by Crozier, M: *État moderne, État Modeste. Stratégies pour un autre changement*. Fayard, Paris, 1997.

<sup>12</sup>“We are losing the skills of cooperation needed to make a complex society work,” the capability of cooperating is a basic, primitive skill of coexistence in community where localness has a major importance. Richard Sennett, *Together: Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. Anagrama, Barcelona, 2012.

<sup>13</sup>Concept which Eduard Delgado used to express his systemic vision of the city for culture (10th anniversary in memoriam of his passing).



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