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DIGITALISATION AND INNOVATION IN CULTURE

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DIGITALISATION AND INNOVATION IN CULTURE AS A PLEDGE TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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A DIFFERENT WORLD? LESSONS FROM THE CRISES

After undergoing a sudden cultural change imposed by the pandemic, in 2023 we are witnessing an adaptation to living with the virus and attempts to return to the 'old normal'. However, a simple return to the pre-COVID-19 state of affairs is not possible nor, as some may argue, desirable. For instance, Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy has stated "the pandemic is a portal"¹, or a gateway between one world and the next. The 'new normal', along with new wars and armed conflicts in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, has pushed us to thoroughly rethink recent severe global humanitarian, health, environmental and economic challenges. In a way, our new reality has opened the horizons of ethics and aesthetics of solidarity, care, and critical thinking in the cultural sector and beyond, thus offering a foundation upon which to build change in society at large.

The crises have transformed policymaking agendas towards more cross-disciplinary, innovative and collaborative approaches that take strong, sustainable perspectives into consideration. They have also underscored the need for more reactive, adaptable monitoring tools to support policymaking in unpredictable environments. Such data has prompted the SDC and its partners to respond quickly and productively to the new global challenges with the funding of small actions, programmes at country level and regional programmes. The plurality of policy interventions and cultural projects across all regions have focused on increasing digital literacy, enhancing access to culture and solidarity funds throughout the last three years.

To name just a few examples, the 'Platform for Artistic and Solidarity Action' was created in Honduras with the support of the SDC by the Committee of Cultural Centres network of cultural organisations, in order to support independent artists in relation to their difficult working conditions in the pandemic and reach out to a rural, confined or socially distanced audience. Whereas domestic violence has risen in the

pandemic, SDC partners in Bolivia developed a community social action project, 'Social Sculpture against Violence,' to prevent cases of violence against women and young people. With the aim of mitigating the consequences of the pandemic on the Albanian independent cultural sector, the SDC financed the project 'Transformation instead of cancellation,' which fostered the transformation of physical activities of five regional and local cultural projects into the virtual realm, including support for the documentation, production and publication of virtual tours of cultural heritage sites in Albania.

Such interventions by the SDC have been aligned with Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2021–24, which recommends innovative exploration of the possibilities offered by digitalisation within development cooperation². When focusing particularly on digitalisation and innovation, the assessment that the pandemic has streamlined five years of technological progress into only three months³ is clear evidence of a crisis becoming a context for innovation. While digitalisation in the cultural sector was already significantly under way prior to the pandemic, the global health crisis has enormously accelerated its expansion, particularly in areas that had previously relied on in-person audiences and visitors. With 89% of all cultural venues partially or completely closed⁴, this acceleration has served to counterbalance some of the harshest economic effects of the pandemic, which has exposed the structural fragility of cultural organisations. The global lockdown pushed our social connections and cultural consumption almost completely online, making the virtual even more of a public sphere than before. The cultural and creative industry has therefore become a testing ground for innovation, due to an unprecedented increase of cultural and artistic content in the digital domain.

Due to the significant support the SDC has provided to the global cultural field in periods of turbulence, it is already possible to have insights into the effects and consequences of digitalisation and innovation on sustainability in the cultural sector. Which opportunities and threats in regard to digitalisation and innovation have we witnessed and can we expect in the future? Having experienced dramatic paradigm shifts in the

cultural sector, we are now at a point where we have to consider how to future-proof the sector against existing and new challenges, as well as which of these shifts to reinforce for the long term. In order to reach a deeper insight into how its partners understand and implement the concepts of innovation and digitalisation in their own cultural organisations, the SDC distributed a survey among them followed by a one-day webinar. But, before presenting a few examples from the survey and the webinar, it is necessary to contextualise the concepts of innovation and digitalisation in relation to culture as one of the key drivers of development.

INNOVATION IN CULTURE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENT

The concept of development was restricted to the economic growth vector until the 1980s as the ‘productivism’ development approach was attempting to maximise quantitative output. As the restrictions on natural resources as well as the environmental concerns involved were quickly uncovered, the notion of ‘sustainable development’ became more relevant, which essentially meant focusing on the socioeconomic processes that allowed people to meet their needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet theirs.

With time, the limits of growth have been reached, the environmental crisis has become apparent and thinking about sustainable development on a local and global level has resulted in an insight that the consideration of its economic, social and environmental aspects is insufficient. These three dimensions alone cannot reflect all the complexities of global society and hence culture is identified as the fourth pillar of sustainable development⁵. Its role is further highlighted within the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as culture determines the relation of people to the world and, thus, opens up a pathway towards cross-cutting innovation in all aspects of development. Researchers, think tanks and policy-makers are becoming more

conscious of culture’s growing importance in development processes.

It should also be mentioned that the plurality of perspectives is leading, however cautiously, to a certain conceptual consensus. Even if culture, innovation, creativity and technology have all become key terms, we still have a long way to go before we fully grasp all of the connections and causalities that exist between these notions and sustainable development. It is challenging to define innovation without determining whether it is an attribute or a process, since it is a concept with multiple definitions, referring clearly to the ability not just to create something new, but also to re-invent, connect seemingly unconnected dots, dissolve conventional paradigms, and thus provide solutions to both old and new issues. Only innovations have the ability to upset the status quo and trigger development, and stand out in circumstances such as those of the current crises, which are marked by the necessity to anticipate future scenarios.

As the arts and culture have always valued the idea of what can otherwise be imagined and thus have continuously produced new content, developing new models of collaboration and integrating technologies in novel ways, innovation has always been at the very heart of the sector. Relevant studies⁶ have shown high school students’ problem-solving, creative thinking, and critical thinking abilities were all improved by arts-based education. The arts and culture encourage creativity, and creativity leads to innovation, which contributes to the resolution of many of the world’s most serious challenges. Innovation stemming from culture and the arts has the capacity to enhance lives, transform communities, create jobs and economic growth, as well as to have spillover effects on other industries. Throughout history, innovation in culture very often led to innovation in other aspects of society such as community development and integration, health and wellbeing, environmental protection, creative industries, urban regeneration and others.

Volatile changes in the digital sphere and the global society contribute to a higher degree of democratisation of knowledge. Humanitarian crises, climate change and the pandemic call

for many types of knowledge (scientific, artistic, technological) to be integrated in order to manage the complexity of the new development paradigm and cultivate effective governance. The expansion of innovation sources nowadays gives cultural actors a new role, which is especially important in this context due to their creative abilities. Examples of such innovative initiatives within the cultural sector are easily found among SDC partners. The project 'Promoting environmental art in Nicaragua' was very successful in raising awareness of environmental issues among children, youth and adult audiences through innovative artistic practices throughout the country. In Kyrgyzstan, new artistic designs gave a boost to traditional crafts and small textile industries. Within the 'Culture for Democracy' project in Serbia, innovation has been understood as developing new modes of collaboration by initiating a mechanism that involves citizens in defining their own cultural needs and leads to empowering artists in terms of community participation. Overall, the current problems drive the cultural sector's capacity to innovate in important areas such as collaborative creation and experimentation, audience development and diversification, technological advancements, experiential goods and services, innovative management approaches and new ways of responding to social needs.

DIGITALISATION AS AN ASPECT OF INNOVATION

In the last three decades, cultural policy has been increasingly influenced by digitalisation. Digitalisation should be differentiated from digitisation, which entails the act or process of digitising, i.e. the conversion of analogue data to digital data. Nowadays, museums are increasingly creating digital archives of their analogue art collections in order to achieve better preservation and accessibility. One of the impressive examples of digitisation among SDC partners is the online archiving of the primarily oral Somali culture (sounds, poems, religious and historical manuscripts etc.) in order to make it more accessible to future generations.

Digitalisation, on the other hand, describes the adoption or increased usage of digital or computer technology by an organisation, an industry or a country. It refers to a variety of widely accessible and possibly paradigm-shifting technologies such as social media, internet analytics, cognitive computing, biometrics and so on. Thus, digitalisation is concerned with considerably more than just technological progress as it requires a thorough innovation of infrastructures, legal environments, production models and cultural norms. With regard to the arts and culture, digitalisation has pushed the publicly funded cultural sector towards a new constellation of stakeholders and a new regulatory environment. It has altered the authority of cultural institutions, producing liquid forms of ownership and introducing new players into the field. For example, during the pandemic, live performances were streamed via online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Vimeo, each with their own set of regulations. Digital technologies have recently been playing a key role in the intangible economy, as they enable diverse forms of social exchange and contribute significantly to different forms of innovation.

In recent years, besides the pandemic pushing the digital transition beyond even the wildest predictions, the introduction of 5G, artificial intelligence and big data was always going to cause more change than any other technology in the previous 30 years. As a result of the digital transformation, new forms of (co)creation, production, distribution and access to culture have emerged, as have new strategic and operational business practices. Audiences have developed a demand for innovative ways to 'visit' museums, 'attend' theatre performances and engage in book readings as a result of increasingly sophisticated technology and the use of digital devices to experience cultural activities remotely. Many cultural organisations' sustainability and relevance have been and will be determined by their ability to move from in-person to digital.

The SDC and its partners have also recognised that this can strengthen organisations' resilience to future shocks and provide a cost-effective approach to reach a bigger audience. For instance, Bonum Factum Gallery in Uzbekistan managed to create online courses for artists and launch a

digital international exhibition during the pandemic. Shagaf for Digital Expression, an NGO based in the occupied Palestinian territory, developed a project based on artistic and digital advocacy for issues facing farmers, while researching the culinary, agricultural, cultural and artistic heritage of the area. In the words of the project leaders, the meaning of digitalisation for Palestinian artists is “broadening borders, breaking isolation and siege in reaching more audiences”. Another project that connects digitalisation to development in a way that improves everyday life in a sustainable way is ‘Creatics’ implemented by the BANJ incubator in Haiti. The project intertwines theory and practice by offering young creators training in new information technologies and various kinds of digital phenomena (NFTs, social media, virtual reality etc). It is not difficult to recognise how such projects have wider socioeconomic impacts on the communities involved beyond their cultural aspects, such as social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, economic sustainability, community empowerment and self-determination, as well as strengthening local image and identity.

WHERE TO NEXT? HORIZONS OF FUTURE ACTION

So far, we have learned that the SDC has been supporting diverse projects that are rooted in new understandings of digitalisation and innovation in the arts and culture, as well as a sense of common values which then become guidelines in distributing resources and implementing collaborative actions. Cultural networks such as the SDC Community of Practice for Culture and Development seem to be more effective tools when bringing social and political change to societies than traditional forms of organising. Within the network, the SDC and its partners provide conditions for a meaningful exchange on the current situations in different contexts, as their better understanding is essential when it comes to creating alliances beyond borders and preparing the field for structural changes.

These are just some of the examples of how the SDC network members encourage interaction between the artistic, cultural, technological, political and social fields, and, in the transformation of everyday cultural life, tend to appear as implementers of the process of digitalisation and innovation which facilitates socially engaged action in diverse directions. In doing so, they are also promoting sustainable cultural diversity which implies that all groups of people have a collective choice to cultivate their culture and, just as important, a collective choice to determine the nature and means of innovation in culture.

On the other hand, SDC partners also recognise the challenges related to digitalisation and innovation in the sector, the biggest of them being the notorious digital divide. Lack of internet access due to infrastructural issues or inadequate funding, a lack of basic digital literacy, and a lack of net neutrality (an equal treatment of all data online) are some of the factors that have been contributing to the divide. According to data from UNESCO, regular internet access is still not available to 46% of the world’s population⁷. Also, it is unequally divided among demographic categories, with women, rural populations and the elderly being disproportionately disadvantaged. All of this is creating considerable obstacles for the diversity of cultural expression and leading to the deepening of existing inequities.

Therefore, it is also time to reconsider the parameters of diversity and inclusion in our virtual programming. Many new vulnerable groups have emerged, such as young cultural workers at the outset of their careers and freelancers without a reliable support structure during a continuous crisis. Thus, cultural participation gaps are still present, if not exacerbated, in our post-digital era. How do we connect with individuals on the other side of the digital divide while contributing to synergies between the ‘green transformation’ and digital technologies? Here, the SDC and its partners could have an important role to play, by working towards reducing the digital divide through their networks. There are several ways to achieve this:

ENDNOTES

- › joint **advocacy** for the creation of cultural policies, sector strategies and action plans to support the digitalisation of the cultural sector and ensure fair remuneration of cultural workers in the digital environment;
- › collaboration of stakeholders in the creative sector in increasing the **transparency and availability of data** on the creation, production and distribution of and access to digital content, in order to analyse specific digital skill gaps and ensure that evidence informs policy-making;
- › creation of training programmes to enhance the cultural sector's digital skills and competencies to ensure that **capacity-building** and alternative support are equally accessible and inclusive so no individuals or groups are left behind in the digital shift;
- › development and implementation of cultural cooperation programmes which encourage digital literacy and skills as well as support to cultural organisations to transform into **learning spaces** where the public can acquire digital literacy skills and competencies through co-creation;
- › support to research on the **environmental footprint** of the most widely used digital technologies in the cultural sector.

By using these and other ways towards bridging the digital divide, digitalisation and innovation in culture can create more opportunities towards a more sustainable future. We saw how valuable culture is to society's emotional well-being throughout the COVID-19 crisis and how the increased use of digital technology radically affected the way cultural content is (co)created, exchanged and distributed. We must continue to reassert the crucial role of the cultural sector in societal well-being, especially at this time of uncertainty for humanity, using the digital tools available and the inherent innovation of the arts and culture to our advantage.

- 1 Roy, A. (2020). The pandemic is a portal. *Financial Times*, 3(4), 45.
- 2 See more at Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA (2020). Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2021-24. Bern: FDFA. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/sdc/publications.html/content/publikationen/en/deza/diverse-publikationen/broschuere-iza-2021-24.html>
- 3 "The COVID-19 recovery will be digital: A plan for the first 90 days" (2020). McKinsey Digital, 14 May 2020. www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/the-covid-19-recovery-will-be-digital-a-plan-for-the-first-90-days#.
- 4 United Nations Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights (2021). Report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cultures and cultural rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CulturalRights/Pages/Covid19.aspx>
- 5 UCLG (2010). "Culture: fourth pillar of sustainable development." *United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Policy Statement* 17.
- 6 See for example Williamson, P. K. (2011). The creative problem-solving skills of arts and science students—The two cultures debate revisited. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 6(1), 31–43.
- 7 "Scaling up digital learning and skills in the world's most populous countries to drive education recovery" (2022). UNESCO, 21 April 2022. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/scaling-digital-learning-and-skills-worlds-most-populous-countries-drive-education-recovery>.

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