

For the future: Make cultural relations count in a post-crisis global society

The Covid-19 pandemic has a crushing effect on the work of international cultural relations. Activities and collaborations worldwide are cancelled or postponed, while most cultural venues are forced to close their doors. Artists and organisations, including our members, are severely affected by the abrupt discontinuation of their activities, which rely so heavily on people coming together to collaborate across borders. Actors in the field moved to the digital realm as an initial response, but how to go forward in the longer term? How can we ensure that, after this crisis, cultural relations continue to bring trust and understanding between the people of Europe and the wider world?

1. Covid-19 effects on cultural relations work

In order to get an overview of the situation confronting international cultural relations, EUNIC is documenting and analysing the impact of the crisis on its members. Some major findings:

- An estimated 6.6 million euros of income was lost by EUNIC members due to branches closing.
- 85% of members temporarily closed at least half of their branches worldwide.
- Almost half were forced to cancel contracts with artists and experts.
- More than half foresee discontinuing or downsizing programmes.
- 13% are concerned about staff downsizing.
- Of those members who had to resort to new ways of gathering income, 40% have started to charge for their cultural offerings and 30% have applied for private funding.
- 85% of members are not eligible to apply for emergency government funding.

National, regional and local governments and other actors have taken important measures to mitigate the crisis and the European Commission has launched the Creatives Unite platform to gather such initiatives. We join a chorus of networks, organisations and individuals across Europe who have flagged the dire situation of culture in this crisis, calling for strong responses in support of the sector (e.g. Culture Action Europe, ECF, Europa Nostra, Members of the European Parliament, and many more).

However, many EU countries are focusing only on a response at national level, leaving behind our joint European and global responsibility. Barriers currently raised for public health reasons should not remain the norm. Now is no longer the time for countries to look inwards.

The crisis will only be resolved, the global cultural sector will only recover, and international relations will only be restored if peoples of the world are enabled to meet and collaborate freely with one another.

2. The importance of international cultural relations

Cultural relations generate a spirit of dialogue and global solidarity. Cultural relations can be at the heart of the solution to remain connected, resilient and in good mental health in the current situation. In the face of a truly global challenge, this is more important than ever. Cultural relations strengthen the idea of a shared Europe, increasing its self-reflection towards a common awareness of joint values.



Cultural relations are key in creating trust and understanding and a more peaceful world by bringing people together on a global scale. Cultural relations have played an important role in fostering peaceful relations between the peoples of the world. With all EU Member States dedicating a considerable amount of their budgets to cultural relations (EUR 2.9 billion in 2019), maintaining world spanning networks of cultural institutes (more than 2,500 branches with more than 35,000 staff), cultural relations have been over decades a prominent tool in foreign policy.

While cultural participation improves **health and well-being**, cultural relations can **positively impact conflict resolution, peace building**, and related policy development. Research has demonstrated that cultural access is the second most important determinant of psychological well-being.

Culture creates jobs and competitiveness and can play an important role in the global economic recovery. EU cultural employment is today at 8.7 million, making the sector one of the largest employers and providing jobs for 2.5 times more Europeans than the automotive sector. There is a EUR 8.7 billion trade surplus in cultural goods, and cultural and creative sectors are estimated to contribute 4.2% to EU gross domestic product (EU Agenda for Culture, 2018).

The global economy is driven by cultural creativity, innovation and access to knowledge. Cultural and creative industries represent around 3% of the global GDP and 30 million jobs (UNESCO, 2016). While global trade in creative products has more than doubled between 2002 and 2015, growing at a rate of 7% annually, mutual capacity building and the strengthening of the cultural and creative industries stimulate jobs, empowering youth and women to contribute to resilient economies (UNCTAD, 2019).

3. Ways forward

To counter the isolation of national cultural policies, **transnational initiatives connecting artists and professionals across borders are being called for** so that cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue can flourish.

To continue peace building, reaching out to people worldwide through culture is needed. As HR/VP Josep Borrell said on the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, “three-quarters of the world’s major conflicts have a cultural dimension. Bridging the gap between cultures is urgent and necessary for peace, stability and development.”

Local cultural sectors worldwide require support. Many countries are not in a position to devote additional resources to the cultural sectors. Here the EU can stride ahead and develop, together with authorities and organisations in partner countries, support schemes that help.

International mobility must not stop. Whereas questioning our traveling habits and reducing them for the sake of the environment is absolutely necessary, our friendly relations with the world depend on people meeting. Only by learning about each other can we develop trust and shed our fears and prejudices.

Our project “European Spaces of Culture” tests new ways of engaging in cultural relations and should be enlarged. The models found here can serve as way out of the crisis, starting a new kind of doing culture in the future – fair, equal, based on mutual listening and learning, co-creation and a bottom-up approach.

We must adapt our way of working in the digital realm, finding new, hybrid ways of doing cultural relations beyond the crisis. As the need for face-to-face meetings will remain permanent, 81% of EUNIC members are looking at developing hybrid formats that combine physical presence with



virtual content. And while we are exploring digital means, we must leave no one behind. Communities without digital infrastructure must also be included in the programmes we develop to bring people together.

Cultural heritage is important for Europeans, as it is for the people from other continents. 71% of Europeans agree that “living close to places related to Europe’s cultural heritage can improve quality of life” (Eurobarometer 466). Working on cultural heritage in the framework of cultural relations can be a steppingstone to bring people together and start an honest and meaningful discourse with communities in partner countries about our past and responsibilities.

Cultural relations can play an important role in the global economic recovery. Creating cultural goods and engaging in culture does create a significant amount of jobs – jobs that bring value, empathy, peace and a sense of belonging to communities. Investing in culture together with our partners is the right thing to do now to emerge from this crisis as unscathed as possible.

4. What we must do now

“Culture is at the heart of progress: it can play a truly key role in the aftermath of the current crisis.” Along with this joint statement by HR/VP Josep Borrell and Commissioner Mariya Gabriel published on 21 May 2020, we must seize the opportunity to put cultural relations at the core of our efforts to combat the rippling effects of the coronavirus outbreak. As culture has proven to be essential in sustaining our societies in moments of crisis, **culture must be protected from budget cuts in the post-crisis financial frameworks and EU budgets for culture must be substantially increased.**

Therefore, we call on all actors in cultural relations to:

- Install measures so that culture is enabled to connect people worldwide, share values to improve international relations and learn from each other’s practice – including supporting EUNIC members
- Look beyond national borders and join efforts multilaterally to manage the crisis
- Demonstrate the power of effective cooperation in meeting the global challenges of our time, including better coordination of all EU activities in cultural relations
- Invest more in a joint EU foreign policy that includes an appropriate role for cultural relations
- Strengthen the organisational and financial set-up in the EU, including the European Commission and the European External Action Service, to engage in culture
- Continue investing in European cultural cooperation, resist cutting budgets for networks, co-capacity building and cultural relations activities on the ground
- Support multilateral initiatives under the EU strategic approach for international cultural relations
- Continue investing in culture within development cooperation programmes
- Strengthen the international component of Creative Europe
- Strengthen and continue existing initiatives such as “European Spaces of Culture” that can contribute to the overcoming of the crisis
- Make support to local cultural scenes worldwide a priority
- Engage in digital and hybrid ways to work in cultural relations
- Learn from each other’s current and future practice by a bottom-up process