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THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CREATIVITY

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In reflecting in this essay for the ASEM 20th anniversary publication, my mind inevitably went back to the 6th ASEM Culture Ministers' Meeting held in 2014 in Rotterdam. That meeting showed that the creative industries could act as catalysts in enhancing the cultural cooperation between Asia and Europe. So, I am very pleased that the creative industries will also be on the main agenda for the next meeting of Culture Ministers in Gwangju in 2016.

The Rotterdam meeting reinforced the conviction that our economies were becoming more cultural in nature and that the economic and social significance of creativity was growing.

The start of the 21st century has required Asia and Europe to employ development strategies in order to foster human creative potential that can respond to the cultural, economic, social and technological shifts taking place. It was acknowledged that the creative industries have the ability to make use of culture to provide new insights and solutions to benefit both societal and economic goals.

At the same time, ASEM Culture Ministers acknowledged that many countries that have placed the creative industries on the policy agenda faced challenges. How to create links between different creative entrepreneurs and between entrepreneurs in creative and "non-creative" sectors? How to broker opportunities for education and science to interact with the creative industries? And, how to make these developments reinforce initiatives at regional and city levels reciprocally?

The Ministers underlined that, in seeking answers to these questions, they had to recognise the value of the creative industries for creating a competitive advantage. Innovation does not come through technological advancement per se: technological advancement can also be traced back to imagination, creativity and craftsmanship.

Observations on creative industries

As this is a subject that is close to my heart, I would like to share some observations and guiding principles on government policy with regard to the creative industries.

The creative industry is characterised not only by innovative products and services with cultural and economic values, but also by its working methods.

A creative entrepreneur takes the needs of the consumer as a starting point and uses the power of imagination and prototyping to make the end result of a product tangible to the public even in the early phases of its development. That approach makes it possible for the creative industry to tackle complex issues and to come up with unexpected, innovative solutions using the latest technology available. That is one of the reasons why the market is looking at the creative industries to provide creative solutions for societal problems. I would like to mention, as an example, the Dutch clothing manufacturer G-STAR, which has developed a clothing line with the American singer-producer-designer, Pharrell Williams, wherein the clothes made from plastic waste retrieved from the sea.

The dynamics of the creative industries have many advantages. By working in flexible, international and interdisciplinary networks, the sector is able to react very fast to the needs of the market. And, the growing number of start-ups provide for inventiveness and a continuous supply of innovative ideas.

However, the dynamics of the sector also carry a risk. For example, in a country like the Netherlands, the number of new companies has risen much more sharply than the number of people working in the creative industries. This downsizing in scale tends to lead to a loss in productivity as well as a loss in added value. As a result, the creative entrepreneur often lacks the time and the financial resources to develop a sustainable business model. This is compounded by the fact that traditional financial instruments are often not available to creative entrepreneurs.

In a policy paper that I recently submitted to the Parliament of the Netherlands, I identified a number of areas where government support could be instrumental for the creative industries.

Education

For an industry that relies on creativity, innovation is essential. That, in turn, calls for a strong emphasis on both personal development and permanent, lifelong learning. The creative industry as a whole needs to establish a tradition of combining business development with staff development through, among others, learning plans.

The demand for responsive and creative professionals requires that we look at our educational system. Our educational system needs to prepare us for the future. This, not only by providing the knowledge and skills that we currently know, but also by nurturing the capacity to develop new ways of thinking and the ability to adapt to new, at present unforeseen, changes in our environment.

What does this mean for our educational system? How can we adjust our educational system such that it will stimulate students to develop their curiosity and creativity even more than it already does? How can our educational system help our citizens to break away from existing patterns of thinking and working?

When I look around me, I see, both in the Netherlands and many other countries, promising signs that we are moving in the right direction. For example, in the fields of cultural and technology education, where teamwork, free expression, working with one's hands and a critical mind set have become important ingredients.

Craftsmanship

One area of the creative industries where, in my view, the educational approach deserves special attention is the field of creative craftsmanship.

Next to each designer stands a craftsman who can work side by side with the creative entrepreneur to develop his or her ideas and who is able to translate these ideas into practical solutions and products. Sometimes these craftsmen can be found abroad, but I think it is important to continue to train these craftsmen in one's own country and to treasure and safeguard traditional crafts that are still useful and relevant for the creative industry of today and the future.

Finance

One of the most common bottlenecks for a creative entrepreneur is the inability to invest in research. Most creative industries are too small and lack the financial means for research. At the same time, research – in many cases – is focused on long-term perspectives and on long-term results that do not fit the needs of the creative entrepreneur. To make it worthwhile and relevant for small- and medium-sized companies to participate in long-term research, governments, with the support of larger and financially strong companies, can help stimulate private-public research programmes that are tailor-made for the relatively smaller-sized creative industries.

I look forward to the discussion with my Asian and European colleagues on this subject at the upcoming ASEM Culture Ministers' Meeting in Gwangju in 2016. And, I congratulate ASEF on the 20th anniversary of the ASEM process.

This article is part of the **ASEM 20th Anniversary Book on 20 Years of Asia-Europe Relations**. The publication is a collection of articles by leaders and experts from Asia and Europe on the past, present and future of ASEM. Selected articles from this collection will be compiled and published as a '

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