



The Culture Vaccine: boosting creative 'immunity' in the aftermath of COVID-19

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Abstract: Is the post-pandemic era the momentum for mainstreaming a cultural rights-based approach, given the undeniable recovery qualities of culture creation and enjoyment, along with an increased attention to cultural rights defenders as human rights defenders?

'If we are to preserve culture, we must continue to create it' stresses the early 20th century historian, Johan Huizinga, underscoring the intrinsic value of culture, as of life itself. Humanity, as a notion encompassing all the different narratives of the past, in terms of identities and their interactions –cultural diversity–, will continue to exist as long as culture creation and enjoyment are safeguarded. This is very much echoed in the views of the residents of war-torn Ukraine, particularly the youth and people in the arts, who consider culture as their [super-power](#) and the protection of cultural heritage as their weapon for safeguarding the Ukrainian national identity.

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The drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)) had the insight, already back in 1948, to clarify in Article 27 that

*Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to share scientific advances and its benefits, and to get credit for their own work -
Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.*

By highlighting that cultural rights are human rights, Article 27 stood as a basis for the further codification of cultural rights. Access and participation in cultural life, along with unhindered culture creation, are the core elements of cultural rights, which are enhanced through further demands. Access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage, freedom to speak truth to power in the form of artistic freedom, and protection of cultural rights defenders are a few among these demands.

Institutional priorities and approaches

An advanced intersectionality of cultural rights and their links with social cohesion have been widely acknowledged during the interactive dialogue established between the United Nations Human Rights Council and the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Ms Alexandra Xanthaki. The Rapporteur [stated](#) her focus on the obligations which states have undertaken under international law in relation to cultural rights, with

an intention to draw more attention to the rights of migrant artists, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex artists, artists with disabilities, and the cultural rights of marginalised communities.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the online enjoyment of cultural products has drastically increased, while at the same time, the working conditions of artists and cultural workers have rapidly deteriorated. In monitoring the implementation of the [2005 Convention](#) on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the 2022 [UNESCO Global Report](#) 'Re-shaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good' notes a loss of 10 million jobs globally in the creative sector, which practically translates to the loss of thousands of jobs and revenues for arts and culture professionals. This paradoxical development has been coupled with further difficulties concerning the inclusion of artists and cultural workers in the various state relief schemes, due to pre-existing volatile working conditions in the sector, lacking especially [social protection](#).

Such harsh reality has pushed the artists to [speak up](#) for their rights as [workers](#) who, while participating in the real economy, have at the same time been suffering from widespread devaluation of their professional identities and thus been deprived from various rights and entitlements as workers.

Significantly, the [call](#) by the former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Ms Karima Benoune, for mainstreaming cultural rights as an effective response to the pandemic, as well as the [announcement](#) of a budget increase of over 100 million Euros for 'Creative Europe' program, from 2022 and till the end of the programmatic period, by the EU Commission, have a common denominator. They share the understanding of the decisive role that arts and cultural products have played, globally, since the very beginning of the pandemic, as one of the main coping mechanisms against this life-threatening occurrence. Even in its digital form, culture has become a tool of empowerment and hope against isolation, fear and despair caused by COVID-19. In December 2022 the European Parliament (EP) adopted a [resolution](#) that highlights the wide recognition of arts and cultural activities by the World Health Organisation as beneficial

to health, including mental health, and to individual and societal well-being, particularly thanks to their multifaceted nature and components, including social interaction, sensory activation, emotional expression, cognitive stimulation and physical activity, and to their capacity to stimulate multiple psychological, behavioural and social processes arts and culture have demonstrated that they are invaluable for the resilience of societies in times of crises.

Mainstreaming culture and cultural heritage in all EU policies –particularly the Green and Digital Transition policies–, improving the working and social conditions of cultural and creative professionals as means for cultural and creative industries to respond to future shocks, investing into protection of the cultural heritage, and strengthening the cultural dimension within the EU's external policy are some of the priorities set out in the EP resolution.

Cultural rights defenders (CRDs) as human rights defenders (HRDs)

Cultural rights defenders, whether self-determined as such or not are agents of much needed positive change. They may rise against political and social oppression, highlighting all types of urgent societal challenges of our times and have the power to inspire others. They pursue the elimination of violations of cultural and other rights and actively promote their enjoyment. However, very often even the peaceful expression of ideas and open criticism against governments results in imprisonment or exile. In this context, culture creation carries important messages and counts for survival and progress.

The margins of who can fall under the CRDs definition are wide and may also encompass various legal entities like cultural heritage institutions. The project of the [Amgueddfa Cymru](#) and the [Mini-Guislain toolkit](#) are among the numerous museum activities engaging actively in equality and social justice, through participation, representation and agency. After all, [museums](#) have a 'unique capacity and credibility to disseminate values such as technology, science and knowledge to a wide, general audience', and are 'more than a reflection of the past, but a channel to the future, allowing an open forum for communication and interaction,

equal access and equal participation', while libraries uphold the right to participate in cultural life.

The European Parliament *'welcomes the EU's substantial and steadily increasing financial contribution to supporting HRDs worldwide, which makes it the lead donor in this regard, as well as its efforts to heighten transparency, flexibility and the development of various programmes to support human rights and the activities and needs of HRDs, including when HRDs work in exile,'* as expressed in the [EU Guidelines](#) on Human Rights Defenders.

Effective protection of cultural rights defenders demands global action, along with the creation of supportive networks in different societal levels.

The 'culture vaccine' reasoning is backed by [neuroscience](#) suggesting that creativity, being the core element of arts, allows for adaptation and flexibility to changing circumstances, survival and prosperity. Needless to say, only culturally sensitive strategies by national and international actors may lead to the adoption of efficient protective measures that will respect cultural differences. The post COVID-19 policy trend of placing an emphasis on a holistic cultural rights-based approach is highly welcomed. Nonetheless, the road from policy creation to actual implementation is long and it is where the civil society has a decisive role –educative, awareness-raising and other– to play.