

Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

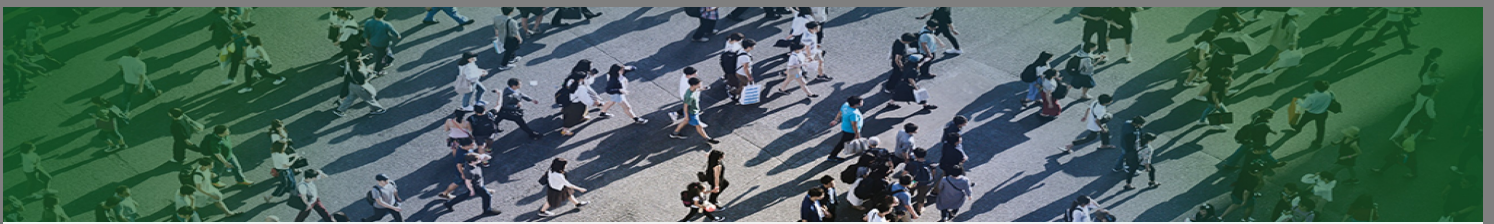
The cultural mobilization in the COVID-19 pandemic

Briefing & Learning Note

22 April, 2020



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Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on 25th March 2020, the #BeyondTheOutbreak Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim to bring together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the sixth thematic LLE (held on 22 April 2020) was devoted to better understanding how cities and local governments are reacting to the crisis from a cultural perspective.

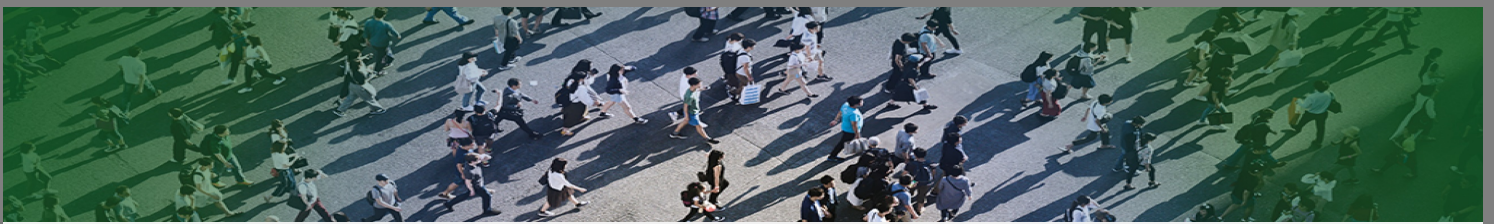
Local and regional governments advocacy efforts to promote the role of culture as an unequivocal part of the solution to humanity's challenges

Humanity is facing an enormous challenge. The COVID-19 crisis is having an impact on every dimension of our lives: public health, labour systems, social interaction, political debate, the use of public spaces, the economy, environment... and cultural life.

COVID-19 is hitting the cultural life of our communities very severely. Libraries, memorials, community centres, museums and all cultural venues are closing... Performances, festivals, parades, carnivals and intangible heritage events are cancelled. Workers in the sectors, who are often in an already precarious situation (self-employed, freelancers) may be left for months without any income. The active involvement of all in the cultural life of the community is very damaged by COVID-19, and so is the welfare and the quality of our democracies.

But... the crisis has generated hundreds of thousands of initiatives, from offering online events, theatre, dance or music recordings, and virtual collections in museums and art centres, to the emergence of totally new initiatives with COVID-19 as their main theme, basically in the digital and multimedia sphere. People have turned to culture to create meaning, to show their solidarity and boost their spirits. Cities and local governments, with their workers, actors and institutions, are making tremendous efforts to maintain activities to ease people's feeling of isolation. There can be no better illustration of why culture should be consolidated as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.



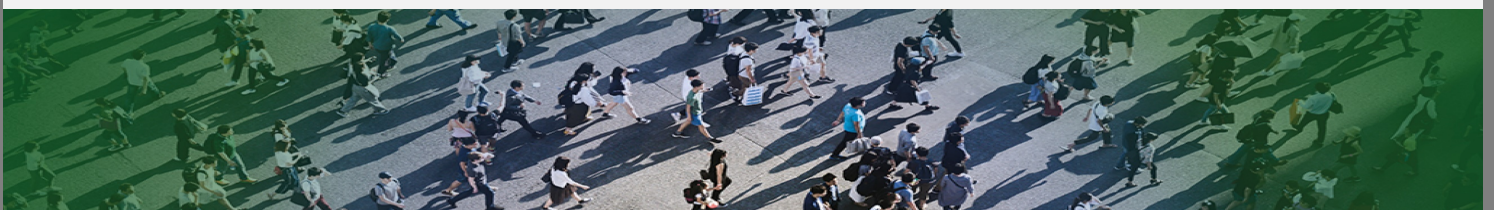


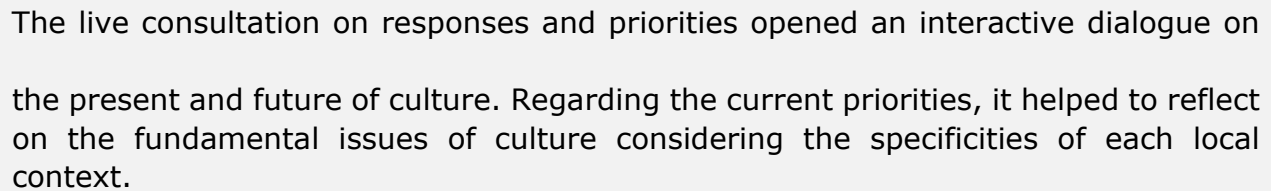
As early as 2010, UCLG was a pioneer in declaring with a Policy Statement that culture should be considered [the fourth pillar of sustainable development](#). This narrative has been reinforced in the [Manifesto "The future of culture"](#) approved at the UCLG World Congress of Durban in November 2019, and the Abu Dhabi [Declared Actions](#) resulting from UN Habitat's WUF10 in February 2020. These documents acknowledge culture as an unequivocal part of the solution to humanity's present-day challenges and a main strand of global solidarity.

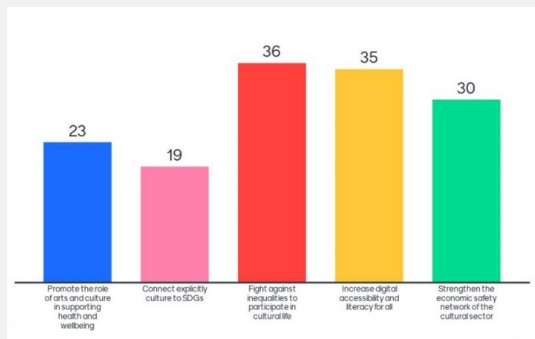
Cultural communities have responded to the crisis, underlining the impressive power of culture to build healthy, resilient communities and improve well-being for all. UN-Habitat, UCLG and Metropolis, as co-organisers of this Live Learning Experience, are aware of the importance to keep strengthening collaboration with cultural organisations, institutions, actors and agents to advocate for the role of culture in the challenges that the 2030 Agenda seeks to address.

The cultural mobilization at local level in the COVID-19 pandemic

How are cities and local governments, with their cultural initiatives, organisations, networks and actors, reacting to the crisis? How we can better guarantee that culture is at the centre of the reconstruction in an explicit and operational way? The Live Learning Experience on Culture was opened by UCLG's Secretary General Emilia Sáiz, who emphasized the role of culture as *"a critical part of the development of humanity and as an antidote for the crisis"*, which cannot be overcome with economic, governance and sanitary measures alone. Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Maimunah Mohd Sharif, followed by recalling the experience at the 10th World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi and the objective to connect culture and innovation to the achievement of the SDGs, and recognized that *"as local governments, we must take this opportunity to rethink a more sustainable future through the lens of culture and innovation"*. José Alfonso Suárez del Real, Councillor for Culture of Mexico City and Copresident of the UCLG Committee on Culture, also noted the relevance of this Session as a true process of







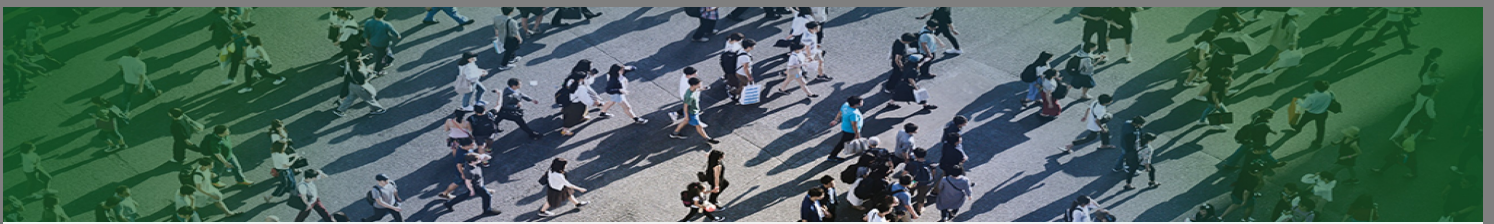
Challenges and initiatives in the face of the outbreak

Following this consultation, representatives from several LRGs around the world shared the main challenges and initiatives of their cities and local governments to make sure their response to the Covid-19 crisis place culture at the centre of the global dialogue.

Cities and local governments highlighted the preparation of post-confinement scenarios, with special local assemblies and councils, cultural plans, policies and programmes to ensure that **culture is at the heart of any local recovery process**. Participants agreed that creativity must be put into play in order to find adequate and sustainable solutions to the crisis. José Alfonso Suárez del Real recalled “*the power of culture to awaken the social imagination that has made it possible throughout history for cities to reinvent themselves again and again in adversity*”. Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of UCLG Culture Committee, brought to the table the importance of advocating for culture to be explicitly present in the reconfiguration of the UN 2030 Agenda due to the global crisis, and in this light presented the recently launched Statement on “Culture and the COVID-19 pandemic” by the #culture2030goal campaign ([see here](#)) that aims at promoting the place of culture in (expected) new initiatives around the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

One of the main concerns raised in the session had to do with the **protection and promotion of cultural rights** during the quarantine phase and beyond the outbreak. Participants to the event stressed the key role that access to culture and knowledge has over the effectiveness of local government responses addressing



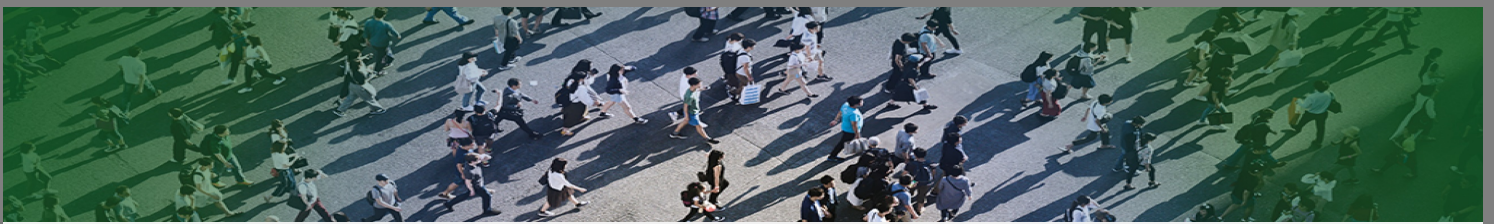


citizens' needs. As stated by Karima Benounne, UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights: "*The freedom of artistic expression, the freedom of assembly, the right to*

participate in cultural life, the enjoyment of scientific progress... are guaranteed by international law and are equally important as other rights". Likewise, she claimed that cultural rights should be used to foster optimism, which is not false hope, but key to survival. Luca Bergamo, Vice Mayor in charge of cultural development of Rome and Vice-president of the Committee on Culture of UCLG, presented a very relevant initiative in this regard, The Rome Charter on Cultural Rights. This document shows the strong commitment of Rome to develop a vision for the future centered on cultural rights: "*The Rome Charter on Cultural Rights is based on the notion that, if we say everyone has the right to participate in cultural life, as article 27 of the Human Rights Declaration UDHR states, we are saying something that challenges the societal model that we are living in.*" Another element of discussion regarding cultural rights was the need for new construction (not reconstruction), based on a bigger commitment to the idea of the public as an essential part of the societies of tomorrow. Enrique Avogadro, Minister of Culture of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, stressed the need of public culture officers to work together advocating for the value of culture, which is more important than ever in terms of building social cohesion. He also added that "*UCLG and other international frameworks are essential*" in this regard.

The need for physical distance has multiplied in many cities the creation of **new possibilities for access to heritage and knowledge**, including access to digital library resources, virtual visits to museums or visual arts exhibitions, and the dissemination of concerts and theatre, dance and opera performances online. Much of this "cultural content", already belongs to people through municipal, national or international institutions. In this regard, several initiatives were presented during the session: The City of México developed the new initiative "Cultura en casa", a digital platform designed to bring culture to the citizens during the lockdown, had already reached 12M people. It is a common resource developed jointly with the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. Other cities like Bogotá have also secured digital access to broad culture content and activities to engage citizens. Creativity has inspired resourcefulness to libraries as well, as noted by Gerald Leitner, Secretary General, IFLA. Despite libraries where forced to close as a result of COVID-19 crisis, Leitner affirmed that during the quarantine phase libraries have increased spent on electronic resources because there is a new demand for digital contents; Vienna is offering eBooks for free to other cities through the network, ensuring they are ready for the



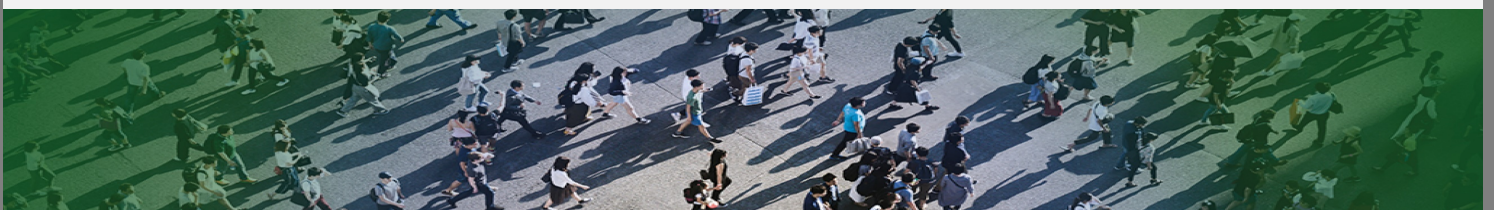


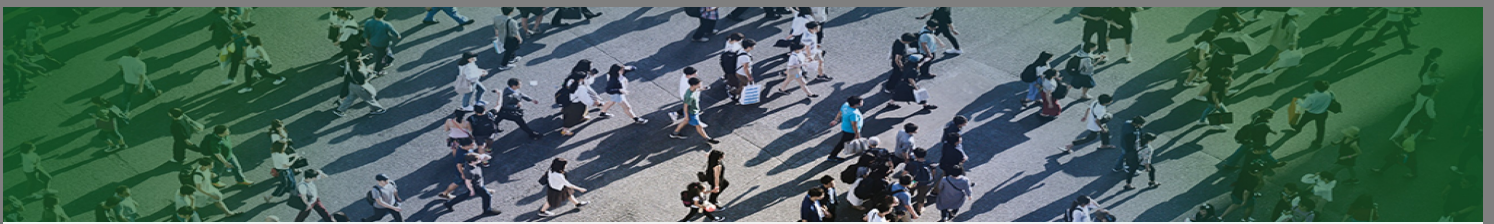
expected raise in need. On her turn, Elena Shchukina, Director of the Novosibirsk City Museum, presented "Museum Quarantine" as a new project aimed at bringing the history of the city to the citizens' homes. She explained that 90% of the projects will be offered on-line.

Participants agreed that responses to the pandemic should aim to look at a broader framework of **inequality** and foster inclusion. Cities and local governments expressed the need to ensure that the crisis does not increase the already high levels of inequality at local and global level, which can particularly affect women and girls, minorities, older people, indigenous peoples and those with less access to basic public services and economic resources. In order to tackle this situation, many cities are dedicating specific programmes to support the most vulnerable population, i.e. those inhabitants who have less possibilities to access cultural life, either online or physically: for example, libraries, that have special services to be able to bring books to those who request them. In this sense, Gerald Leitner claimed that *"libraries are connectors of democratic access and providers of basic services"*. He explained that demand is growing for other than usual library services like drive-thru options to provide access to information and knowledge.

Gwangju has relied on its capacity to collaborate with other local governments, the central government, the private sector and civil society to provide financial help to communities and significantly to the most vulnerable groups. Professor Gyonggu Shin from the Gwangju International Centre affirmed that collaboration had produced a very good management of the challenges and acknowledge *"the importance to understand cultural events as spaces for learning, collaboration and solidarity for all, not for simply entertainment"*. Karima Bennouna stressed the relevance to target specific measures to different language groups and people with disabilities. She insisted on the need for new cultural forms based on technology to guarantee equal participation for all: *"The inclusion of diverse voices, women, indigenous people and minorities must be maintained even in the face of difficult budget cuts."* She also expressed that support cultural rights defenders at risk should prevail as a priority as well. As recalled by UN Habitat's Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif, local governments bear the responsibility to invest in bringing local culture online, expanding service platforms and targeting minority audiences: *"Virtual culture should engage grassroots groups and communities."*

On the other hand, Catarina Vaz-Pinto, Vice Mayor in charge of culture for Lisbon, admitted that whereas on-line and digital technology has witnessed a huge progress

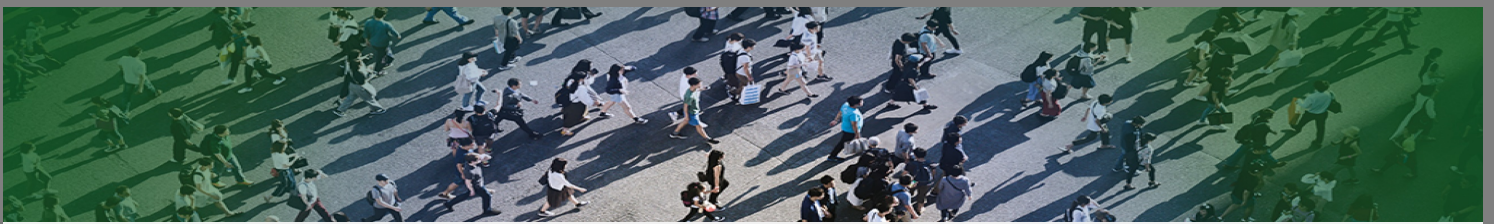




and can have positive effects, create new models of business and new opportunities as a tool for inclusivity, its development demands a more ethical framework to tackle fundamental human rights. Besides, she recognized that *"we all agree that the future should be virtual and real at the same time. Physical component of culture remains paramount."* Siphelele Ngobese, from South Africa Cities Network, highlighted at that point the importance to reflect on physical public spaces, from an African perspective, where cities are relatively young, and cultures and arts' practices are gathering-based. "This is causing us to rethink how we gather in public space in the context of social distancing." Giorgio Ficarelli from DG DEV-CO, European Commission, also noted that *"the challenge of physical distancing is a real threat for cities, with many cultural activities taking place in public spaces"*. It was agreed that call to distance is counterintuitive to human nature, and this is particularly felt in cities. As Luca Bergamo posed: *"Urban spaces are places where communities are created, and not just flows."*

Participants expressed the local cultural sector's demands for more flexible, more **sustainable models of creation, production and consumption**, since the pandemic is challenging the limits societal and urban models that concentrate richness and spread inequalities, and the incompatibility of current economic models with the fulfilment of human rights. Chiribabu Maharjan, Mayor of Lalitpur, showcased examples of the incompatibility of certain cultural activities, especially those related to heritage, tourism and crafts, with the restrictions implemented due to the COVID-19. For instance, the programme "Visit Nepal 2020" had to be cancelled. This has spurred the reflection on the adequacy of the tourism industry model and has encouraged to seek for alternative economic models based on sustainability, such as domestic tourism. He said: *"We must revive traditional cultural behaviour with flexibility and adapt to the outcomes."* Ege Yildirim, from ICOMOS, pointed out: "The way out should be based on more local tourism, a better way to enjoy natural heritage sites again, as well as digitalization." She also noted that heritage assets and organisations are now in a very vulnerable position and that creativity is key to better cope with societal changes. Seemingly, Catarina Vaz-Pinto recognized that there is a huge opportunity for cities like Lisbon to foster cultural proximity projects enabling access to culture, and that participatory projects which involve people to practise, co-create, participate, co-direct and co-curate have to be reinforced. *"We believe that every citizen is a creator; but, will we be able to produce a "slow culture" model that can allow us to reach more enriching experiences?"* Luca Bergamo also affirmed that



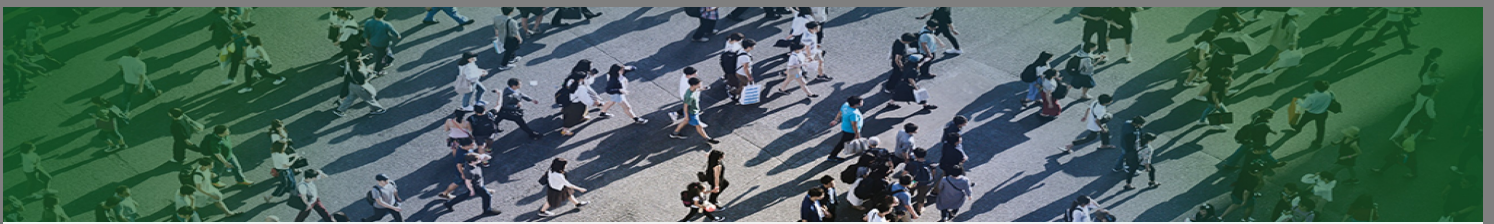


cities must encourage the change of the current urban model that is being put in discussion due to the pandemic.

Cultural economy, related to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, was also identified as an important area of policy intervention. Cultural workers are very often in precarious situations (self-employed, freelancers) and may remain for months without any kind of income. Besides, most cultural initiatives and organisations will be forced to restructure their programmes due to the principle of physical distancing. Joan Subirats, Vice Mayor in charge of culture and education of Barcelona, recalled that this crisis has (as did the 2008 financial crash) badly affected the cultural sector, and its effects (a fragile cultural ecosystem) were still noticeable in the city: *"This virus is not democratic at all. It affects everyone, but as you know it is more heavily impacting the most vulnerable sectors, including a substantial portion of the cultural fabric. We have to be with citizens and those actors that are most severely affected."* He presented the 10 measures implemented by Barcelona in order to mitigate the effects of the crisis in the cultural sector. Maimunah Mohd Sharif recognized that cities have never plenty of financial resources, and in this regard the UN framework must provide an immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis to facilitate the recovery at local level.

In order to prevent a more negative impact on artists and cultural actors, which is already significant, local governments like Kitchener have taken a stand in favour of advocating for financial support from federal governments. Berry Urbanovic, Mayor of Kitchener and UCLG Treasurer, explained that local, federal and national levels in Canada have allowed the development of financial support mechanisms to be rapidly effective. He underlined the importance to think about the need to create specific policy and budgetary frameworks that allow preventing crises. Moreover, Kitchener has explored other ways to support community-based projects with the initiative "Kitchener says thanks", focused on music concerts. Nicolás Montero, Councillor for Culture of the City of Bogotá, presented economic stimulus and aid packages to artists, agents and small and medium companies and organizations in the city, and underlined *"the need to improve research and data collection of the economic impact at all levels to find assertive alternatives"*. Another issue raised by local governments in this regard concerns the fragile situation faced by independent cultural scene and emerging artists in cities like Buenos Aires, with over 500 cultural independent venues that are in a dire situation. Enrique Avogadro highlighted the role of the local government to help enhance their sustainability: *"We need to open to a new grassroots cultural movement. There is an opportunity to be open and lose part of*



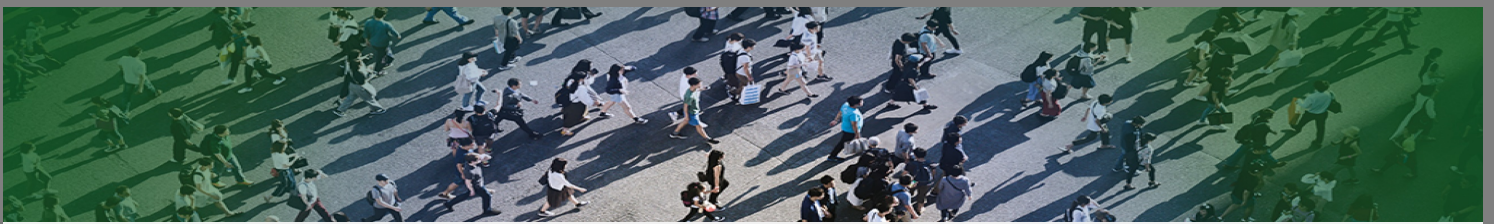


our "monopoly", being able to hold a wide conversation with cultural actors in order to shape a more human world and a better future for all."

As the global crisis has increased the interdependence of all cities and governments, **solidarity and cooperation** programmes have been strengthened during the quarantine period. The initiative "Cultura en Casa", developed jointly by Mexico City and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, is one of the cases of collaboration and coordination at local level in the context of the crisis. As noted by participants, the global crisis proves the need to multiply exponentially the collaboration of all governments as it shows us their interdependence. Cooperation with civil society was referred by many local governments as a fundamental mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of their own support measures for the cultural sector. Time and resources to enhance collaboration among local governments, communities, agents and cultural actors as a source of inspiration, relief, trust and hope for a better future in cities should increase as the post-COVID-19 measures unfold. For the city of Bogotá, as Nicolás Montero commented, creativity and solidarity are the main drivers for the joint implementation of measures to share resources like digital platforms with other cities: *"Culture cannot be the heritage for just a few; culture must be part of the daily life of all."*

A last point made by participants also referred to this crisis as an opportunity to improve the quality of some **broad cultural dialogues** that humanity needs to discuss. As Enrique Avogadro posed, *"we need a more human world, not a more totalitarian world"*. The capacity of heritage and cultural expressions to bring hope amidst the climate emergency and the COVID-19 crisis was highlighted and applauded as well. The relation of nature and humanity also emerged as one of the essential topics to be tackled in the process of reconfiguration of urban models of development. The Session also provided space to showcase documentation of the local impact of the pandemic. Films, photographs or performances can enrich local or municipal archives, can help rethinking a new future and also can help creating special events, memorials or commemorative monuments related to the experience of the crisis. Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the UCLG Culture Committee, showed three inspirational images: the call of solidarity by the project [Wuhan We Can](#) launched by this Chinese city in January, the design "Ceci n'est pas une grippe" by Catalan activist and visual artist [Dolors Boatella](#), and the work of indigenous artists from [Walkatjara Art Centre](#) in Australia on public health and COVID-19; he also recalled the UCLG's Culture Committee has a dedicated page to the issue ([see here](#)) that collects references to the cultural mobilization of cities and local governments.





The video [Couch Choir sings "Heroes"](#) (by David Bowie), an initiative from Brisbane, closed the Session as an illustrative example of cultural cooperation in times of COVID-19.

Key messages and lessons learnt so far

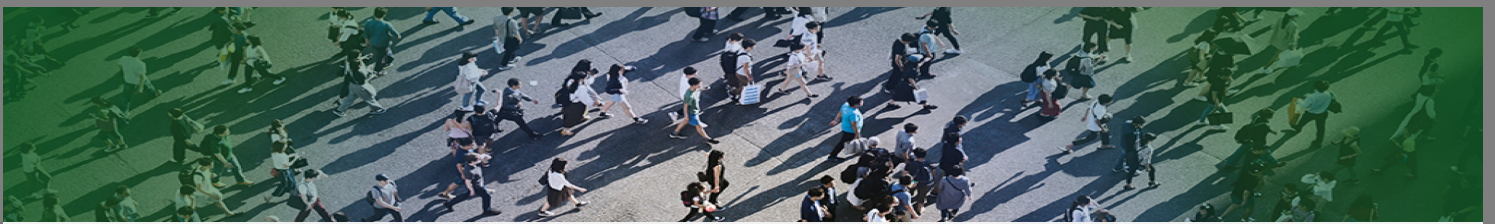
1. Cultural concerns must be at the centre of the recovery

Cities and local governments must continue to advocate for cultural concerns to be at the centre of the global debate. Communities, actors and cultural agents must take the lead in these debates. In fact, cultural mobilization "is happening" because the central driver of culture is the need to understand humanity and the essence of societies, especially in these times of crisis, distress and uncertainty. This is a process that challenges us all as human beings. The "need of culture" that we all have experienced during the crisis is the perfect illustration of why culture should be consolidated as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. The recently launched "[Decalogue for the post COVID-19 era](#)" advocates for culture as an antidote for the secondary effects of the crisis.

2. Cultural rights must inform the long-term public policies of cities and local governments

Cultural rights are the frame that allows open discussions on the future of societies. Cultural rights are fundamental to citizens freedoms and development and are suitable frames for the long-term public policies of cities and local governments; they are the closest governments to the population and therefore have the greatest responsibility not to leave anyone nor any place behind. The full exercise of cultural rights is key to building social cohesion and regenerating community-based culture. Cities and local governments can reinforce the protection of cultural rights in local legislation frameworks, and certainly advocate national governments to adopt this perspective. Conversations on how communities interact with, and access, culture need to be addressed urgently. Better knowledge and information management must be understood as a human and cultural right as local governments continue to expand, systematize and recover the platforms, experiences and knowledge created during the crisis in collaboration with cultural organizations, actors and agents.





3. COVID-19 is impacting vulnerable groups at global level and LRGs are key to address inequalities

Addressing inequalities must be a priority for cities and local governments, through the development of programmes on heritage, creativity and diversity available to every citizen. Guaranteeing equal access to cultural participation is key to ensure that cities remain places of opportunities for all. Online access to cultural resources must be secured for all. Lockdowns can aggravate burdens such as poverty, violence, discrimination and abuse of vulnerable groups. Special efforts to support the most vulnerable in cities, fostering solidarity among territories and putting measures in place against discrimination and exclusion are crucial. Culture, after isolation, must aim to be a factor of solidarity and equity in cities. Local governments must advocate for coordinated solutions to ensure that all citizens can freely contribute to the aftermath.

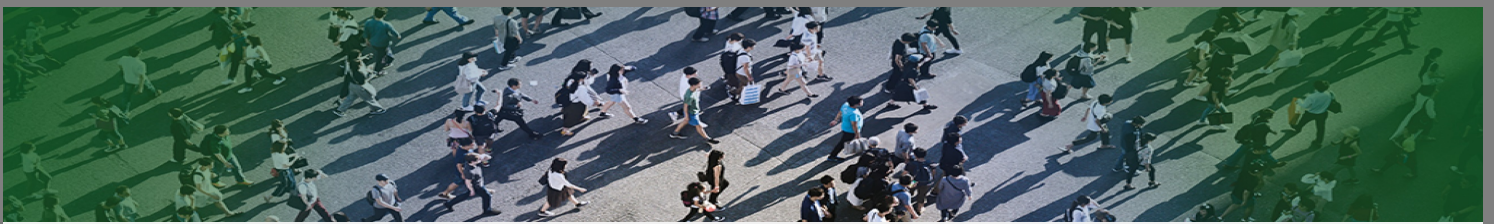
4. LRGs can provide solid ideas for alternative and sustainable models of creation, production and consumption

In the face of COVID-19 crisis, to rethink the way we live, work, produce, consume and relate to nature has become crucial for the sustainability of societies. Cities and local governments must provide spaces for reflection on the role of culture as a source of inspiration to envisage different models of creation, production and consumption, with time-scaled measures and progressive systemic changes. Culture has a role in developing a truly sustainable 2030 Agenda beyond the outbreak; in other words: culture must be explicitly in the plans, instruments and reporting mechanisms around the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs to be elaborated in the coming months and years, and especially for the High-Level Political Forum foreseen for July 2020. Culture, common goods, climate change and social inequalities are some of the fundamental issues that must be part of the global dialogue on fair development.

5. Emergency responses to COVID-19 must protect the economic and financial sustainability of the cultural sector

At local level the economic dimension has in culture a vast field that must be protected and secured. The cultural sector as a whole needs special attention, as its economic and financial sustainability is in serious danger. Cultural workers are very often in precarious situations and the crisis is hitting them





especially hard, and most cultural initiatives and organisations are being forced to restructure their programmes due to the principle of physical distancing. Moreover, culture is key in the creation of post COVID-19 scenarios, which will affect the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

6. Cooperation and solidarity must remain a priority beyond the outbreak

As culture is positioning as one of the main strands of cooperation and solidarity, cities and local governments are strengthening their collaboration and made joint efforts to provide programmes on heritage, creativity and diversity for all. Yet time and resources devoted to cooperation and solidarity must be given more attention, since coordination among local and other spheres of government will be even more relevant in the aftermath, when it comes to implementing new approaches to sustainable development. The international level also plays an essential role in this context and local governments should seize the momentum to call for fruitful dialogue and improvement of multilevel governance.

7. Discussions on the future of humanity must include a broader cultural lens

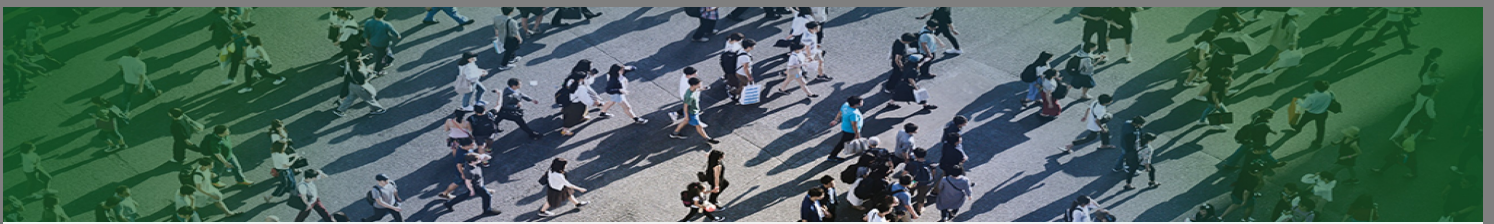
The importance of research, scientific evidence and critical thinking in our societies has to be discussed urgently from a broader cultural perspective. The crisis also challenges the relationship between humanity and nature, and the time and resources we devote to cooperation and solidarity in our lives. Will these opportunities be seized? Or will the response to the crisis be based on unscrupulous competition, growing inequalities and less democracy?

Resources

The presentations made by the cities during this Live Learning Experience are available [here](#).

UCLG's Culture Committee has created the webpage "[The cultural mobilization of cities and local governments in the COVID-19 crisis](#)" to collect evidence of the cultural mobilization of cities and local governments; it includes now more than 120 references. The [Cities for Global Health](#) platform, facilitated by Metropolis, is a living repository of other LRGs' initiatives to confront the COVID-19 crisis.





Other resources:

- UCLG "[Decalogue for the post COVID-19 era](#)" (2020)
- UCLG Manifesto "[The Future of Culture](#)" (2019)
- UN Habitat, Abu Dhabi [Declared Actions](#)", WUF10 (2020)
- The Statement "[Ensuring Culture fulfils its potential in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic](#)", by the #culture2030goal campaign (2020)
- The report "[Culture in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda](#)", by the #culture2030goal campaign (2019)
- The [OBS](#), good practices on culture and sustainable development database of UCLG Culture Committee
- "[The Seven Keys](#)", a programme to integrate the cultural dimension in the localisation of the SDGs (UCLG, 2020)
- "[Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action](#)" (UCLG, 2018)
- The toolkit "[Culture 21: Actions](#)" with the 9 Commitments and the 100 Actions on "Culture in Sustainable Cities" (UCLG, 2015)
- The "[Cultural Rights Defenders](#)" report by Karima Bennoune, the [UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights](#), and her Call for inputs for a report: "[Cultural rights and climate change](#)" @UNSRCulture
- UNESCO's [Culture & COVID-19: Impact & Response Tracker](#).
- IFLA, [COVID-19 and libraries](#). Key resources for libraries in responding to the Coronavirus Pandemic
- ICOMOS, [Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development](#) @icomosSDG2030
- ICOMOS, On the crisis of the pandemic COVID-19 - Response from the ICOMOS "[Our Common Dignity](#)" WG
- ICCROM, [Heritage in times of COVID](#)
- "[Cultural Creative Spaces & Cities. Charter of principles.](#)" Policy project co-funded by the European Commission (2020)
- "La Cultura en Casa", an initiative by [México City](#), the [Autonomous City of Buenos Aires](#) and others #culturaencasa
- "[La cultura in casa](#)", an initiative by the city of Rome #laculturaincasa

