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Swiss Agency for Development
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REFLECTION PAPERS

ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT



FOREWORD

We are now in the second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. For many people, daily life has become harder; for some, each day is a struggle for survival. Restrictions, job losses, deaths, overstretched health systems and tense political situations have highlighted once again how fragile and vulnerable not just people but also political structures are in times of crisis.

The current vaccine inequality aptly illustrates the rising inequalities throughout the world. Richer countries are starting to return to partial normality, while the pandemic's impact on poorer countries grows steadily – the picture before us is precarious and almost hopeless.

Even in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, there are those who win and those who lose. Initial outpourings of solidarity and mutual concern can turn into social fragmentation, the isolation of individuals, and nationalism. The virus is both silent and loud at the same time; it can change quickly and unpredictably. This makes it hard to gauge, even though we have human control and science at our disposal. What is the meaning of a crisis? Is there a purpose we shouldn't lose sight of? And what part can art and culture play in this?

François Matarasso's 'Making Sense of a Crisis' and 'A Route to Renewal' reflect on the meaning, temporality and negotiation of different interests during times of crisis from the perspective of culture and development. The arts have the power to address the uncertain in creative ways, giving them the potential – particularly during difficult times – to create meaning, allow feelings and situations to be expressed, and lend strength to communities.

Art and culture are not alternatives or nice-to-haves; they are a human right based on the basic needs of both the individual and the collective to actively participate and be involved, contributing to socio-cultural development.

Under its motto 'Culture Matters', the SDC works to foster independent and vibrant arts and culture scenes in its partner countries. In times of global crisis, it is crucial to ensure long-term support for the arts, which contribute to community cohesion, exchange and collective thinking. The creative potential can also lead to new courses of action, and can even make utopian thinking something of a reality. Matarasso focuses on four areas for discussion: supporting artists, protecting projects, healing and recovery, and speaking up for culture. The issues raised by these points concern both the here and now, as well as the arts of tomorrow. It is up to all of us to deal with these challenges, including the SDC, which makes every effort to strengthen the field of culture and development.

Matarasso's papers contain both inspiring thoughts as well as invaluable and challenging guidelines. Art and culture have the power to confront any new normality, and to use it to fulfil their creative potential – a process that the SDC's engagement for culture and development also seeks to harness, protect and support.

We hope you will also be inspired by François Matarasso's work.

Christine Schneeberger



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1

MAKING SENSE OF A CRISIS

CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT AFTER
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Understanding the unknown

A warm evening in a north Italian town; still and empty streets. Into this quiet comes a single voice, soaring like a bird as it follows the line of an operatic aria. Someone is singing Puccini from a third-floor balcony, to neighbours who stand on their own balconies, isolated by social distancing but united in music.

In the early days of Covid-19 pandemic such images came to symbolise hope in the face of overwhelming tragedy, and Italy's singers inspired imitators across the digitally-connected world. Information about the new disease in Wuhan had been controlled by the Chinese government, so it was when they saw Italy felled by coronavirus that most people grasped the scale of the threat. In Spring 2020, as health workers fought to save the dying and contain the spread of Covid 19, art seemed a truly vital human resource in the Milanese evening.

This image is true, but it's also misleading. It is true that people turned to art during the months of distress and uncertainty. Under virtual house arrest, they filled long days with reading, TV series and games, picked up instruments and learned new crafts. The social, cultural and economic significance of culture had been growing for decades, along with people's access to its means of creation and distribution. Art was available, as never before, to meet people's need for distraction, entertainment, consolation and sense-making.

But the image is also misleading. The pandemic produced two different realities—one experienced by those who could work from home, and another lived by the essential, manual and low-paid workers who could not. The difference between these groups is stark: in England's most deprived areas, the Covid-19 mortality rate is *four times* that of its affluent

districts.¹ Inequalities within rich countries were mirrored in poor ones, where lack of resources made the crisis a catastrophe. There have been few hopeful images from Brazil or India. Finding ways to reconcile these deeply detached experiences is a major political challenge: the 30% reduction in the UK's international aid budget is not a promising sign.²

Cultural workers on the edge

Wherever they live, cultural workers have been among the worst affected by the pandemic and the public health measures introduced to contain it. A few artists are celebrated and wealthy, but most earn barely enough for their needs. Freelance and often irregular workers: they're paid when they perform, sell or teach. The venues, bars, art centres and schools where they work were among the first public spaces to be closed; in many countries, they have not yet reopened. Richer governments gave financial protections to businesses and employees, but creative workers are often excluded from such schemes. In poorer parts of the world, artists have no safety net at all, and few politicians think their problems or future are important.

They are mistaken. In reality, as SDC's *Reflection Papers on Culture and Development* show, culture has become essential in almost every field, from the economy to education, from health services to democratic life. The reasons for this change are complex, but there can be no doubt that, all over the world, in different ways and for different reasons, people place a high value on culture and are conscious of its place in their lives. In holding to the outdated idea that culture may be desirable but is not necessary, many politicians are out of step with citizens.

¹ Cumulative age standardised mortality rate per 100,000 population for deaths involving COVID-19 by deprivation decile: England (March 2020 to March 2021), *Resolution Foundation* 28 May 2021

² Changes to the UK's aid budget: *UK Government News Release*, 20 November 2020

A human right, capability and necessity

'Everyone has the right to participate in the cultural life of the community' says Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—and rightly, because on that participation depends the ability to represent oneself and exercise other rights, such as freedom of expression. But it has never been very clear what participation really means, either to states or citizens. During the lockdown, the city of Rome and UCLG, the global association of cities, published the 2020 Rome Charter, which defines it in five capabilities.³ If we are able to 'discover, enjoy, create, share and protect culture,' the Charter proposes, then we can participate in cultural life.

People did not sing from their balconies for the economy. They did it for joy, for well-being, for connection and to find meaning in their experiences, especially those, like the pandemic, that are traumatic and hard to comprehend. In recent years, SDC's support has enabled refugees to create exhibitions in Somalia, theatre about environmental protection in Bolivia, murals to revive urban space in Palestine, and radio plays about teenage pregnancy in Tanzania, among countless others. None of these projects made much money, but they were profoundly important to the people and communities concerned because they spoke to what mattered most to them. These cultural projects—in which people with very little invest time, energy and care—nourished them as human beings.

³ www.2020RomeCharter.org

This kind of cultural participation builds skills, confidence and networks, community resources, and space for co-existence and democracy, but face-to-face work has been suspended almost everywhere, depriving the poorest of activities that support learning, social life and well-being—and give hope.

Responding to the pandemic

Where possible, these projects have moved online, with unexpectedly successful results. Platforms like zoom have enabled them to increase the scale and frequency of participation: art workshops have been a lifeline for isolated people, including children cut off from the social contact of school. It has often made it easier for people with disabilities and young people to participate, and this work is likely to continue in future. Still, digital access is difficult or unavailable for millions, so a new line of inequality is rapidly hardening. In any case, even if online access were universal, we will always need to share space physically: everyone loves a good film but it does not offer the human contact of live performance.

Of course, that is an advantage for autocratic regimes. It is easier to control a culture consumed passively at home, as George Orwell warned. When people gather to enjoy culture in public spaces, when they participate in art workshops, when they express themselves in creation, they enact the reflective processes of democracy itself. So some states have used the pandemic as cover to restrict freedom of assembly and expression. The need to protect public health has allowed them to close artistic spaces without being accused of censorship, but with the same effect. In any case, an artistic sector that is fragmented and struggling to survive financially, is in no position to offer resistance. Ground lost now will be may not be easily regained.

It is a bitter paradox that while so many relied on culture during lockdown, the people who created the art they enjoyed were working in supermarkets or delivering parcels. No one knows what kind of art sector will emerge from this crisis, but it will have lost many artists, and especially among new, different and marginal voices, the people already struggling to make a space for themselves within majority cultures.

Making sense of the experience

It is now clear that the pandemic will not end simply or quickly, and that the world that emerges from the crisis will be very different—wounded and traumatised, many of its old certainties shattered, and scarred by widening inequalities. Populations in the global South are likely to be struggling with the pandemic long after vaccination has allowed life to resume a more normal course in rich societies. Policy makers will not see culture as a priority in this new landscape, and the sector is likely to contract as its creative actors are forced to find alternative work. Like other effects of the pandemic, that will be felt most sharply by poorer people in poorer countries, with the effect of strengthening still further the cultural hegemony of the rich.

And yet everywhere people's need for art's resources of comfort, pleasure and sense-making will be urgent. Through art's narratives, rituals and especially its questions, we can begin to recover from this tragedy. So SDC's support for the cultural lives of the world's poorest people will be vital—but it may also need to adapt to meet the changed conditions.

AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

1 Supporting artists

SDC supports artists and cultural producers who are highly vulnerable workers, and many have already been forced out of the sector.

- How can SDC map and respond to the new circumstances of artists?
- If established models of artistic production, such as festivals and touring, remain suspended, what alternatives can be proposed?

2 Protecting projects

Most of SDC's projects in arts and culture have been suspended or postponed, but they addressed needs that have not disappeared.

- How can SDC adapt and restart its planned projects?
- What changes might be needed in order to deliver them safely?

3 Healing and recovery

Many people will be grieving and traumatised by the pandemic, and feeling very insecure about the future.

- Should SDC cultural projects aim to address the crisis and its effects directly?
- If so, what kind of initiatives and projects could artists propose to support affected communities?

4 Speaking up for culture

The space for culture is changing and it may not be a political priority, even if it is a human one: SDC may need to defend culture once again in the post-pandemic world.

- What case does SDC need to make for culture, and to whom?
- How can it involve the people most concerned in responding and advocacy?

2

A ROUTE TO RENEWAL

CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT AFTER
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The pandemic has been a major setback for sustainable development everywhere.

Sustainable Development Report 2021⁴

Contrasting experiences and aspirations

The Covid 19 pandemic is a defining event of this generation. Climate change is a greater threat, but its causes and effects are complex and its pace much slower. The pandemic was brutal and lightning fast. It was frightening, easy to understand and it had unprecedented social and political effects. Who could have imagined that entire populations would be confined to their homes for months? Or that states would take on wartime levels of spending and debt?

The pandemic is a defining event because it divides everything into before and after, and that division now shapes our hopes and fears. Many people long to 'go back to normal'. A growing antagonism to public health measures, symbolised by the relatively benign responsibility to wear a mask in public places, is one symptom of that reaction. But other people do not want to go back to a normality that meant poverty and marginalisation. They want a new social settlement to come out of this suffering: and why not, since the old political rules have all been torn up? To placate both groups, politicians say they will 'build back better', because that promises both a return to what was before, and hope that it will be somehow improved.

But the paradox of this moment is that, although everyone agrees the pandemic has changed everything, it has, in reality, changed nothing. It has only reinforced existing inequalities: the better off work from home while their savings grow, while the poor maintain essential services in growing insecurity. Existing divisions have widened, as they did in the 2008 financial

crisis. Whether governments can respond better remains to be seen, but the character of that response will shape the coming decades.

In this fluid but urgent situation SDC has an important role because many of the poorest people depend on it for their immediate needs and the possibility of a better tomorrow. Its actions also represent values and analyses noticed by other actors. SDC's support for cultural action in development is distinctive and respected; its rationale is outlined in the Reflection Papers published in 2020. The pandemic does not change the commitment to assign 1% of budgets to this work, but it opens questions about how that funding should now be used. What are the new priorities for art and culture in developing countries? How should SDC adjust its programmes to meet changing needs?

These questions have been explored by members of the SDC Community of Practice for Culture and Development. In spring 2021, an internal survey was undertaken to map the pandemic's effects on cultural actors; it was followed by a webinar with SDC staff to test what we know and what could be done in consequence. This paper sets out four principal areas where change might be needed. For the sake of clarity, it summarises issues that deserve fuller treatment and omits others entirely. In taking this approach, it is hoped to outline a road map whose details can be developed appropriately for different situations and cultural contexts.

⁴ Sustainable Development Report 2021, p. 20 <https://www.sustainabledevelopment.report/reports/sustainable-development-report-2021/>

Protecting cultural actors

Creative workers (artists, performers, managers and others who earn a living partly or wholly through cultural work) have always been precarious. Typically freelance, their income is low and insecure. During the pandemic, most were unable to work but ineligible for income support, even where state aid was available. As a result, many sought other work to survive, and may never return to the cultural sector.

As a donor committed to culture, SDC has played a vital role in protecting the people without whom no creative projects can happen. Among other key actions, cooperation offices accepted changes to agreed project plans and targets, provided flexible support to enable people to adapt their activities and gave quick access to small scale, light-touch funding.

Cultural workers themselves responded with energy and new ideas, keen to help their own communities, even when there was no external assistance. They showed that they often have the best knowledge and solutions, and funders could do more to trust that judgement, not always defining programmes that artists must fit into. Although it is easier to support established groups, it is vital to find ways of supporting freelancers. Small grants with minimal administration can do a lot to empower artists and, through them, communities. A fragilized cultural sector will also need to prioritise collaboration, between actors but also between donors.

Digital and online activity has exploded during the pandemic, leading to artistic and social innovations, including increased audiences, participation and access for many. But that must not obscure the unequal distribution of computers and internet services, as well as the skills needed to use them. Moving online risks deepening some social divides, even as it reduces others, and this is an area where international aid can make a real difference. There is also the problem of monetising digital work that can reach large audiences without bringing any income to creative producers. SDC could explore a digital micropayments model to support the new creative economy.

Priority action to protect cultural actors:

- Create a light-touch small grants programme for local artistic action
- Address the digital divide through equipment and training
- Explore a cultural micropayments model for creative producers

Supporting communities through culture

SDC works with creative actors because their work supports people and communities, often with unconventional methods and results. Despite local variations, the pandemic has left death and grief everywhere. Recovery means coping with trauma while managing the practical demands of reconstruction. Artists have a valuable role in helping people make sense of their experience through creativity and collective encounters of shared experience. During the pandemic, artists used outdoor space for safe performances and public events: there was renewed interest in mural painting as a means of community expression. Such activities have potential to rebuild the habits of social contact that many have lost during months of lockdown.

The effect on children and young people has been especially severe, both through lost education and the interruption of friendships and socialisation: the psychological legacy will be long. The unequal burden carried by women increased during the pandemic, with the demands of home schooling and caring for the sick falling mostly on them. SDC supports arts projects involving young people and women, from Nicaragua to Tanzania, but will need to further prioritise work with these two groups in order to make up some of the ground that has been lost during the pandemic.

The needs of people living in rural areas and small cities should also be considered because they have disproportionately poor access to services and especially the internet that has helped connect people during the crisis. Cultural projects focusing on community development, such as the work SDC supports in Palestine, may be particularly important in helping these communities to recover.

Priority action to support communities through culture:

- Support outdoor arts and culture activity to rebuild confidence
- Prioritise creative projects involving young people and women
- Strengthen cultural projects that support community development

Protecting the space for cultural democracy

In several countries where SDC is active, the pandemic added to existing crises, e.g., conflicts in the West Bank, Mali and Somalia, and the military coup in Myanmar. The health emergency has also been exploited by authoritarian regimes to further curtail human rights and democratic freedoms, as cultural spaces and gatherings have been proscribed. In the semi-anarchy of social media, rumours spread about the origins of the virus and against vaccination. When autocrats and conspiracy theorists both try to control people's ideas, art's space of tolerance, dialogue and openness becomes more and more important. Where speech is curtailed, even public health messages can offer safe opportunities for creative self-expression and even dissent.

Artists can bring people together in constructive ways, allowing difficult conversations to be held in relative safety. During the pandemic, they learned new ways of working, combining online and physical presences and reaching across borders to make connections. It became possible for a class of school students to speak with a celebrated filmmaker or writer online, and people could participate in events without the cost or risk of being physically present. Virtual platforms have made it easier to provide training and market access to isolated artists, building networks of solidarity and mutual support.

Priority action to support space for cultural democracy:

- Support projects that encourage discussion about artistic work
- Prioritise arts and health programmes as safe spaces for debate

Championing the place of culture after a crisis

In July 2020, The United Nations High-level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Economic and Social Affairs published *Recover Better*⁵, to provide ‘outside-the-box thinking and new solutions’⁶ for a post-pandemic world. It does not mention the arts or culture at all, except for a brief reference to ‘company culture’. This omission is disappointing if not surprising. As in other areas, the pandemic is encouraging some leaders to fall back on old assumptions, without considering whether they still apply. SDC will need to advocate for the value of culture even more effectively if it is to prevent recent gains from being lost. There is so much to rebuild: SDC must demonstrate that culture is not an added value, but a route to renewal.

Advocacy is fuelled by stories and argument—stories that memorably encapsulate lived experience and argument that explains convincingly why things happen. Evidence is the third pillar, but it is less effective at changing minds than the first two. It also matters who is the advocate. The strongest voices belong not to the artists, but to those whose lives have been changed by their work, by the performances, films, exhibitions and workshops they have experienced at first hand. And the digital skills learned during lockdown are well suited to bringing those voices in from the margins to the conference rooms where decisions are made.

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/desa/about-us/advisory-board>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/intergovernmental-coordination/hlab-recoverbetter.html>

Priority action to champion the place of culture:

- Create an arts advocacy strategy with a clear and compelling messages
- Train and support local partners to advocate for the value of the work
- Bring the voices of beneficiaries directly into policy forums via digital means

Leave no one behind

The pandemic has affected countries and people in very different ways, making the SDG principle of Leaving No One Behind particularly relevant in COVID-19 emergency responses and recovery plans.

Sustainable Development Report 20217

The social inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic exist at a global level as well as within societies. In rich countries, successful vaccination programmes have sharply reduced mortality rates, but in many developing countries, vaccines are hardly available. In August 2021, 60% of Germans and 51% of Swiss were fully vaccinated against Covid-19, compared with less than 2% of Nigerians or Somalis.⁸ There is a grave danger that, as the rich world recovers and prospers from a post-lockdown economic boom, it forgets the truth that wiser people have been stating from the start: no-one is safe until everyone is safe.

SDC, as one of the global leaders in culture and development, must ensure that this vital aspect of international cooperation is not marginalised as the world tries to recover from the pandemic. There is a distinctive and important case to make, not simply about the value of culture but

⁷ Sustainable Development Report 2021, p. 20 <https://www.sustainabledevelopment.report/reports/sustainable-development-report-2021/>

⁸ <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

for its vital role in giving people agency and voice. The poor, marginalised in so many aspects of their lives, can take centre stage through the power of their creative expression, and in doing so challenge dominant narratives. In prioritising action to protect cultural actors, support communities through culture, protect spaces for cultural democracy, and champion the role of art and culture, SDC will help the poorest people to be recognised as creative human beings with dignity, rights and a great deal to contribute to the world's recovery.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

In the age of social media, when anyone with a smart phone can tweet their opinions to the world, freedom of expression might seem safe. In reality, the new information and communication technologies have created as many threats as opportunities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of 'frontiers' because of the Iron Curtain. In 1948, freedom of expression was a matter of state policy. Radio was the principal means of broadcasting and governments were largely able to police what was published within their territories. In the Soviet Union, the manuscripts of dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn passed dangerously from hand to hand. The West protested, but enforced its own values through censorship and self-censorship of publishing, theatre, film and TV. In Britain all plays had to be approved by the Lord Chancellor's office until 1968, while Hollywood film studios drew up their own production code to define not only what must not appear but to promote traditional values. The social revolution of the 1960s made such restrictions increasingly

unenforceable (though BBC radio is still accused of banning certain records). In recent decades, democratic nations have gradually liberalised artistic expression, accepting that tolerance of once-marginalised voices can strengthen democratic life.

The more recent digital revolution inherited those liberal values, but in today's globalising world it opens new ideological divisions. Artists expressing alternative ideas are again at risk—and so is the idea of free speech itself. With no frontiers, the Internet has become the territory on which ideological battles are now fought, with their consequences played out in everyday life. When Pussy Riot performances went online, the group's art activism became a global issue for the Russian government. The conviction of two members for 'hooliganism' was an equally public response.

Threats to freedom of expression now come from at least three directions: states, corporations and citizens. Authoritarian governments try to extend control of established platforms like publishing, cinema and theatre, to citizens' use of the Internet. The dispute over censorship between Google and the Chinese government is a conventional instance, but the accusation of 'fake news' may be more dangerous because it undermines confidence in truth itself. From Fox to Facebook, corporations decide what can be said on their platforms, but with little reference to cultural or legal norms in different countries. Nudity and copyright material are quickly removed, while Holocaust denial stays in the name of free speech. Perhaps the most chaotic threat comes from loose networks formed around radical ideologies, who recognise only their right to free expression. Online hate speech and incitements to violence have led to murder, most notoriously in the case of Charlie Hebdo in 2015.

Democracy needs freedom of expression but its defence is more complex now than it was during the Cold War. Art is a vital resource in

this struggle, partly because the artistic imagination resists the control of power, and partly because art's ambiguity is protective. With its metaphors, symbolism and ritual, its emotional connection and its imagery, art enables deniable speech in public space. It can be very difficult to prove meanings or intentions that audiences nevertheless understand perfectly, and that uncertainty can give some shelter to artists brave enough to say unpopular things. The creative work of artists is not always obvious but its emotional and experiential power can resonate for years in people's imagination.

In the republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, SDC's Regional Arts and Culture Programme helps safeguard space for independent creative expression. By financing theatre, jazz and film festivals, contemporary art and cultural education, it enables local artists to contribute to social development in their own countries. This is especially important – and difficult – in Uzbekistan, where cultural policy explicitly promotes a conservative, nationalist ideology. All state theatres must conform to this programme, while amateur and commercial theatres survive on popular entertainment. Only Ilkhom in Tashkent is tolerated as an independent space for creation, but it treads a dangerous line. Its founder, Mark Weil, was murdered in 2007, and the theatre itself has experienced unexplained fires and thefts. Accountable to the Ministry of Justice, not Culture, Ilkhom has an ambiguous status. Some believe it is used by the state to foster an illusion of tolerance, but for others it is a vital space for free thinking and the creative imagination. The work produced by Ilkhom is not obviously political: it operates on the edge of what is permissible. Nevertheless, in protecting alternative ideas and forms of expression, it helps maintain acceptance of different voices and the legitimacy of their expression.

Independent theatre is a minority interest in Uzbekistan but it nourishes the imaginations and critical thinking of people who play a vital role in the intellectual and political life of a modern country. SDC's recognition is vital, but delicate. The visibility it brings can offer artists some protection or increase the dangers they face from state and non-state actors. This is a difficult border and SDC must trust the artists it supports to judge what can be expressed and how. The efforts of some governments, including Uzbekistan, to control or prevent external funding of independent artistic work shows how seriously they take such work. Ilkhom means 'inspiration' and that is exactly what it provides to young artists in a country where freedom of expression is rare and precious

SDC's cultural projects are part of a struggle for hearts and minds. Against those who seek to control freedom of expression, whether for reasons of ideology, power or profit, SDC aims just to keep open the principle of free speech for all. It can seem a difficult, even unproductive task, but it is vital in the campaign for tolerance and democracy at a time when they are increasingly threatened.

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