Local Networks: (a guide to) Reimagining the Work of Cultural Organisations

by Raluca Iacob
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Local networks: (a guide to) reimagining the work of cultural organisations
FOREWORD:

What we mean by ‘culture’

In this guide, we regard culture as a socially-connected pursuit, a way to relate to and engage with the world of facts and the world of ideas, and to transform them while we also allow ourselves to be transformed.

Culture, especially the arts, has the power to affect us and our way of life by showing us a reflection of who we are, by making bridges with other ways of being, by pointing to the directions in which we are (maybe mistakenly) going, and to what matters most.

We see that the arts, but also the interpretation of heritage and other creative pursuits based on community and self-expression, are always related to a certain perspective on life and society, which impacts people by leaving an imprint on their mind frame, well-being and existential stance. It refers to audiences not as passive bystanders who consume culture, but is respectful and understanding of their role in the creation of meaning, their capacity to participate and their creative aspirations. This is not instrumental culture. This is a culture that is aware of its impact on people and communities. This is socially-connected culture.

The relation between cultural rights and a vibrant, just and open society, capable of upholding the fulfilment of all human rights is at the core of all cultural activities. Yet, we tend to talk about culture as an autonomous field and to measure its ‘impact’ on other ‘fields’, and on society as a whole. Even the metaphor of the ‘cultural ecosystem’ sustains this mirage to some degree. This analytical
separation which we try to bridge as spillovers or statistical imprints of economic, social or civic value obscures the fact that our cultural rights are based on a conception of what it means to lead a decent and enjoyable life, a dignified existence as humans in a world where diversity is recognized and protected. It also hides the fact that cultural activities relate fluidly to social, economic, civic and educational goals. Before they are ‘instrumentalized’ or measured for their ‘impact’ or ‘spillover’ effect, they are naturally connected to society.

Any cultural experience has social, economic, civic and educational facets. The way we usually think about culture, as a distinct sector of human activity, is not the way culture actually takes place, because culture ‘happens’ not only when it is produced, but as a continuous experience of all those involved, from cultural workers to its audiences.

Some actors take this relationship between culture, people and communities more seriously than others, and it’s precisely because they cross those imaginary boundaries between ‘fields of activity’, that they unfortunately often fall between the cracks of public policies and cultural management framework scenarios. They can take the shape of cultural centres, local networks and platforms, multisectorial nonprofit organisations, socially oriented businesses, informal groups of cultural workers and enthusiasts.

In an effort to capture the value of socially-connected cultural activity, we are too often hesitant to define them as inter- or transsectorial. We also struggle to identify tools to pass on knowledge from those who already have an impact to those who wish to intensify theirs.

Socially-connected cultural actors are an incredible asset not only for cultural ecosystems, but for communities and whole territories as well, and they deserve well-tailored, specific approaches to reflect, document and transfer their functions, their experience and their work processes. I hope this guide is one step forward in this direction.

Raluca Iacob
Welcome

WHO ARE YOU?

Learning is a life-long pursuit, but new knowledge takes time and energy, that often we feel we no longer have. When our questions are practical, a guide is an appealing form, promising easy fixes for the challenges we face.

Advanced practitioners understand that a how-to rarely tells the full story, and that in order to learn, one needs to understand the context. They indulge in thicker descriptions and stories to reflect on; stories that can be a source of inspiration, maybe even hope, and information that can bring them closer to solving their managerial dilemmas. ‘What worked?’ becomes ‘How did that work in a particular situation?’ or ‘What type of situation made that work?’.

Principles can be learned and the steps can be made clear, but the implementation is always surprising. The role of context is crucial in learning cultural management, and often it is so difficult to formalise into a clear-cut piece of advice, that it is simply ignored for the sake of clarity.

In a world where information is abundant and small organisations juggle multiple tasks, fast-changing priorities and the agendas of their communities and funders, it is hard to find money, energy and time for more than an occasional mapping, a satisfaction questionnaire and an annual board or members’ meeting.

Most small organisations or informal arts groups do not have the needed capacity to do research; those who do tend to neglect the findings when these do not confirm their wishes or their ideas. Small-scale applied research - which is the type encouraged by toolkits - is likely to be used randomly and arbitrarily, depending on when it is received and who is behind it (DiMaggio and Useem, 1980). Even when research does bring drastic changes in the management of a network or an organisation, because of often very brief organizational memories, such decisions can appear discretionary when looked back at from a distance.

Telling an old story to an organisation that has never heard it is a step forward for their learning process. Key conclusions of academic studies on local network development and other people’s examples will for sure not replace the insights and practical learning that a concrete experience of nurturing a local network can bring, but it might offer some ideas on what worked for others and how, and an impulse to find out if they can also work for you.

Whether you are just starting to build a local network, or you are already growing one, we hope you will feel enriched by the contents of this guide.
WHAT IS THIS?

– Chapter 1
We start by the book, with a definition of what we mean by a ‘local network’. We glance at the general rhetoric on local networks, then talk about the different ways in which network(ing) appears in common and specialised talks.

– Chapter 2
Why are local networks interesting, you might ask? Or you might not, granted that you are already reading this. But you could wonder what others see in them, or what they can really deliver. Objectively, what makes them worthwhile?

– Chapter 3
We discuss the ubiquitous notion of context. This is particularly important for any kind of learning about organisational management, and very difficult to summarize. But, with the help of a solid literature review, interviews, case-studies and our fierce minds, we managed to pull out some key strands of relevant external conditions that matter in the life of local networks. We recommend you read and reflect on them before starting a local network, or if you find yourself in a crisis.

– Chapter 4
Even more theory follows! We present the two most common perspectives on local networks. You might not notice, but in public discourse both float undisturbed and often undistinguished, even though they tell very different stories.

– Chapter 5
Are you starting to wonder when we actually get to work on the local network? The answer is now. We introduce the most important factors conducive to a good baseline. Think of it as a canvas to assess your starting position.

– Chapter 6
This part was initially called Network governance, but then we decided just to focus on what works. So we brought together some of the wisdom out there. In fact, governance is just one part of the story, as we would also like you to consider work processes, feelings, giving people the power to take charge, celebration of success and communication.
– Chapter 7
Change is a constant in our personal lives, so why should we assume that networks stay the same? While we do not want to change because we are bored with the way things are, we also do not preach adaptation at all costs. To analyse and reflect on some of the causes of modulations in the life of your network is always a good idea.

– Chapter 8
Here we look at public authorities and their role in supporting local networks. We believe they deserve a special place in our toolkit, not just a brief mention in the ‘context’ part. From the common funding & facilities bit to consultations, initiation and the creation of situations that brew the emergence of local networks, we recognize the important role played by the public administration.

– Chapter 9
International cooperation and local networks may seem like an odd couple, but they work well together. Interested to get fresh ideas on how they can reinforce each other? (Preview: no, it is not only about funding.)

– Chapter 10
We ask ourselves (and you) if local networks are worth it - a question that we consider from time to time about our work in general. No existential crisis here, just a quest for authenticity and relevance.

– Chapter 11
To end this excursion, we take a fresh look at organisations and how they are changing from the perspective of local networks.

Thanks and acknowledgements are in order, and we offer them fully to people and organisations that helped us understand how local networks work.

Finally, for those hungry for more, we included a list of reading suggestions. Many of these were valuable resources for the thinking behind this toolkit and the ideas we put forward, cited or paraphrased here.
I. What is a local network?

A local network is a web of cooperative, horizontal, direct and democratically managed relations between autonomous actors active on a territory.

‘Local’ can be a neighbourhood, but it may also very well be a region or even a small country, if the interactions happen often, the people share more or less the same concerns and deal with a similar reality.

The cooperation can be continuous or periodical, informal or formalised by a contract.

The relations between actors of a local network tend to be very direct, democratically-managed and with little to no hierarchy. This makes for the distinct personality of local networks compared to other types of organisational structures based on cooperation, such as consortia, alliances and platforms.

Autonomy, understood as the capacity to act independently from each other and strategically towards a set goal is a key assumption for this model. But just how ‘autonomous’ can the actors of a local network be? Looking at small cultural centres and cultural organisations, research has found that they are often themselves just a form of organised anarchy (Cohen and March, 1980) - defining problematic goals, using uncertain technologies, and having a fluid participation of staff in management and decision-making. Within such organisations, making decisions about future projects is not a neat and strictly rational pursuit. No matter how strong the connection to the community is, and how passionate the members of the organisation are about their common mission, there always remains a huge space of unpredictability.

New initiatives depend by and large on the available opportunities, the screams of reality and the wishes of those involved. Researchers describe this idea in a whimsical fashion: this type of organisation is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to
which they might be the answer, and decision-makers looking for work’ (DiMaggio, Useem, 1980). Their autonomy, in the broader sense, is actually contradicted by their usually high level of dependence on external situations.

Enraged or enlightened by this perspective? If you are not a newcomer to cultural management, you might have noticed that between the strategic plans, the reports addressed to funders, and the actual practice there is often a big, huge gap that is bridged only by discourse.

The assumption that cultural organizations behave in a rational, strategic and orderly manner is just that, a hypothesis. Many organisations do not develop objectives with the purpose of actually following them other than for the sake of short-term projects and reporting, or are unclear as to their priorities. It does not mean that they are not capable of reaching their goals, it just shows the need for organic development or community-led approaches in cultural management, which are not born from a strictly rationalistic model of organizational behaviour.

This image of the cultural organization leaves to the local network the task of imagining tools and methods that do not coerce their members into fitting the neat and orderly functioning of formalised and hierarchical institutions. And that suits them perfectly, because local networks represent an extra level of organised anarchy.

Local networks are evanescent creatures, which can develop visible contours and weight or can maintain a fog-like state. Nourished by interpersonal relations, with occasional partnerships among members, and based on reciprocity norms, information sharing and mutual trust, they are social and informal beings at their core. Sometimes, their shape gets even more crystallized, with clear coordination and governance structures, based on formal rights and responsibilities and a contract. Local networks depend on good, honest and frequent communication between actors, and a (constructed) perception of togetherness, which often, but not always, mean that they also develop a social identity - a logo, a name, a website, and an explicit goal that others can relate to.

One of the commonly-used methods to analyse networks is to map their constituency, pointing at nodes (actors) and ties (the relations between them). This is fine, as long as we remember that the map is not the territory, and that to understand how they work, we have to look at their drive and their energy generators. More importantly, a new vocabulary and a different approach are needed. If we continue to talk about networks in comparison with organisations, we will evaluate their activities and their results in terms which do not fit their personality.
II. Why are local networks interesting?

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The local is the space where people come together easily and often, and networks are most of the time focused on how to engage and develop the communities that share that territory. Often, the discourse about local networks is so steeped in citizen engagement, mediation or audience development, that no other option even seems possible.

Indeed, it is in the genes of local networks to address civic and social issues that involve democratisation and new power relations between institutions and citizens, because their very nature relies on a different attitude amongst actors. Interdisciplinarity, information sharing, pooling of different types of competences and organisational profiles and a less--hierarchical way of working are the essence of their governance, so it is natural to extend the approach towards people and communities.

Local networks are first of all networks of people, and the sociability, personal empowerment and human connection are felt by those who are not directly involved with their work as well. To them, cultural participation can provide that extra spark of engagement, become more grounded, feel less anxious about their life conditions and be more empowered to address social issues.

Local networks can also involve people that are not members of any organisation, and give them a role. They contribute to community development by creating webs of dialogue and trust between people and with institutions, they can empower or represent them when needed.
At the same time, many cultural managers do not recognize that their audiences overlap — sharing the same type of groups of people who engage with the cultural programme. This overlap is in fact an excellent base for cooperation and collective action between organisations. Such activities can range from cross-promotional efforts (the sharing of mailing and subscriber lists, for example), development and collaborative ventures, coordination of schedules, outreach and cross-over programmes, marketing via a single ticket purchase (e.g. cultural passports) and even shared administrative tasks (Fischer and Preece, 2002). Unfortunately, many organisations with the same (potential) audience still look at each other as competitors, even when they come from different (cultural) sectors and when they are actually seen as complements of the cultural offer, rather than substitutes or competitors.

A focus on the diverse needs of people is a more successful approach to overlapping audiences, than competition. Collaboration (including via participation in local networks) can turn infrequent attendees into frequent ones and non-attendees into attendees, enlarging and diversifying the audience base by reaching out to other actors’ target groups. When organisations share the same space, this type of cooperation is much easier, even though efforts to get everyone on the same page are still needed.

Once you have discovered that you’re addressing same (potential) audiences, you already have a solid ground to act together. This common work can sometimes take the form of a local network.

Donut Group - a network of small-scale arts organisations located outside the city-centre

The Donut Group is a network of small-scale arts organisations located outside the centre of Leeds (United Kingdom). It was founded in 2015 to connect providers and producers of cultural activity in these ‘outer city’ areas and make them more sustainable. Members of the venues support each other informally in management, marketing and programming.

‘The Donut venues experience the pressures of inequality and poor connectivity in contrast to the prosperous core and its larger and well-established producing organisations. The consortium structure of the Donut Group offers the venues an opportunity to voice their concerns and increase their visibility in the city.’

Research carried out in 2018 by Leeds 2023/Leeds City Council and Leeds University showed that member organisations, in varying degrees, are well-rooted in their immediate communities, and that their work proves ‘the potential for producing a more equal and sustainable cultural provision in the city when small-scale cultural organizations are taken into account.’

https://cultural-policy.leeds.ac.uk/projects/the-donut-project/
Local networks are a dream of collaboration where everyone is appreciated and given an equal say in the common work. But, like all dreams that meet reality, it needs fine-tuning and pragmatism to make it work. When seeking funding for the development of a project, or when common advocacy is a goal, formalisation of the network is needed, as a (temporary) alliance or consortium, or even as a new institution.

Discussions and negotiations require time resources of key people even more so in the nonprofit world, where in order to deliver on their mission, organisations must work hard to build strong connections between themselves and with their various stakeholders (Boyle, 2003).

The need to compensate for a lack of resources drives many organisations to enter or found local networks, which will only succeed only if they provide concrete benefits to all participants. Especially for those activities which are not related to artistic decisions or for infrastructure (like space or equipment), sharing and pooling resources is a clever way to be economically resourceful (Bagdadli, 2003).

Organisations that develop local networks for pragmatic reasons need to keep their staff and key collaborators mindful of their common dream. Sharing values and fine-tuning goals are essential to the life of a network. Efficiency alone does not have a soul.

ATHENS CULTURE NET – A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK AND FORUM FOR ARTS LEADERS, ARTISTIC GROUPS AND COLLECTIVES

Athens Culture Net (ACN) from Greece is the city’s first collaborative network of cultural organizations, a forum for arts leaders, artistic groups and collectives to discuss policies, build relationships, share resources and develop joint programming in neighbourhoods. Founded by the Municipality of Athens with financial support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, it has 61 member organizations and 45 affiliate organisations.

‘ACN establishes an active cultural and arts framework for the people living in the city, the visitors, the artists and the institutions. It functions as a link between the main cultural institutions in Athens, offering support, solutions and networking. ACN promotes social inclusion, initiates synergies and connects smaller cultural groups, acting upon the belief that collaboration is the key to the long-term success of any resilient community.’

The network facilitates the collaboration between very different cultural players – the main cultural institutions, artistic groups and collectives – and it brings them in to take part in municipal programmes and major cultural events. The cultural offer in the city is promoted via a bi-annual Athens Culture Net guide and a website. ACN also helps organise artistic programming in Athens neighbourhoods, and acts as a bridge between the cultural players in Athens and the international scene via international events.

http://www.athensculturenet.com/en
SOCIAL CHANGE

Local networks have the capacity to picture a different world, by embodying a more democratic, open and participative way of working and learning together. They can be seen as prototypes of the utopia of social emancipation at grassroots level, which requires a high level of personal commitment and a political approach that takes a critical stance both towards neoliberalism in the arts and the ‘access to culture’ elite discourse of democracy of culture. Local networks as actors of social change represent both the struggle for a better world and the critique of the existing one.

Especially where collective action is difficult, local networks can knit a web of trust that can go a long way. For that, reflection and a political conscience are essential. Looking inwards at potential conflicts and inequalities, and outwards at the challenges faced by the communities they serve, networks need to decide to be either a voice that empowers communities, or a professional association of its actors working to promote their own cause. Local networks are a form of democracy, and a democratic society needs local networks. The same applies to the cultural world.

“Democracy needs the arts (and the humanities which they anchor), for they constitute a crucial element in civil society’s cultural infrastructure. For a free society gains its liberty and its democratic vitality from civil society, and the arts and humanities invest the civil society with its creativity, its diversity and its liberating spontaneity.”

(Barber, 1997)

When cultural, social, educational, civic and other actors come together for joint impact, it means they have identified this common core and want to infuse democratic vitality and awareness in their communities.

Local networks need to develop specific competences and a certain type of governance, and they grow well in a democratic political, economical and social context. In that sense, it is useful to look at the conditions and changes required for the development of non-profit cultural actors in societies which are transitioning from a totalitarian regime to free-democratic societies. This helps to understand the baseline conditions for cultural local networks as well.

- The introduction of competitiveness in the provision of arts and culture through the transfer of state institutions to not-for-profit status,
- The enrichment and strengthening of national culture through multiculturalism and through international exchange and cooperation,
- The establishment of frameworks for domestic creativity and excellence in the cultural industries, and
- A decentralization of cultural production that balances equal access with local participation’

(Čopič and Tomc, 2000)

When these conditions are absent or are still frail, the link between policy and democracy in the arts can be itself a focus of the work of local networks, which will take on the role to build that supportive political and social context.
KOOPERATIVA – regional platform for culture in the Balkans

KOOPERATIVA, a regional network of the independent art scene, connects artists and organisations in the Balkans. It grew from collaborations in the 90s among actors of the independent art scene and emerged as a project in 2005, after the war, when there was a wave of hope, funding and expertise available for regional collaboration, reconciliation funds, and an interest to focus on art for social change. The network was formally established in Croatia in 2012, because the legal system there allowed for 21 founding member organisations from 7 countries, and the Croatian members had relevant funding opportunities and the largest capacity to invest in the new organisation. As of 2020, the regional platform brings together national networks from the independent art scene, as well as individual organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia.

KOOPERATIVA is based on commonplace connections between people. The shared belonging to the territory of ex-Yugoslavia makes understanding easier, especially since members face similar problems across the territory.

‘The network emerged once we became aware that we also wanted to also shape and influence the environment in which we operate. It was established as a new structure in 2012, and the membership was very diverse from the start, with a lot of people coming from visual arts, new media arts, theory and philosophy, contemporary dance, theatre, literature, poetry. We got together multiple times to discuss before establishing the organisation. The process took time and was always driven by one of us pulling it along, someone who had resources funding, who could organise a conference and invite people from the region, so that we were able to advance the discussion about the most pressing regional issues.’

KOOPERATIVA empowers organisations of the independent art sector who want to learn, and joins forces with them in advocacy for their acknowledgement by their local public authorities. In this way, they have helped other national networks in the region be born. KOOPERATIVA actually advocates for multinational funds from the governments of the region in order to secure sustainable funding for regional collaboration in the field of contemporary art. The network has one coordinator, an Assembly of the delegates of the association members, and a Management Board which is composed of five members elected by the Assembly for a three year term.

http://platforma-kooperativa.org/en/home/
We call context that sometimes elusive, but strongly felt presence that is not in our individual power to change from one day to the other, but which greatly impacts our decisions.

Consider international events, such as forums for cultural managers from all over the world. There are many still which do not encourage participants to mention where they are based when they intervene in conversations - which is the place they are working in and where they are drawing their experiences from. But while this option can be rhetorically meaningful, and highlights the commonalities, we also need to remind each other that there are meaningful differences between our realities, our institutions and our histories, which create different terrains for cultural practices.

When it comes to network formation, a social environment that is conducive to networking is essential.
LIFE AND WORK TOGETHER

Sharing the territory means people have lived through similar political, economical and social events, making them aware of particular ways in which institutions work and things get done. While international work and intensified mobility develop the competency to navigate different societal environments, institutions take longer to transform. Historical commonalities and differences, work patterns, trust levels and degrees of individualism and collectivism in a society are important factors that can help or impede forming and maintaining a local network.

A WISH TO TRANSFORM SOCIETY

There are times when societies come to a boiling point and profound changes are felt to be needed. There are also other times when positive transformations and renewed hopes for a better future take the stage. People, communities and organisations navigate troubled waters, quiet seas and good winds, and local networks feed on the enthusiasm that can rise from ideals, or on the contrary from frustration.

Individual and collective empowerment is a crucial socio-emotional factor, and local networks tend to take shape when political, economical or social conditions either take a negative turn, or are given new hopes for the advance of quality of life in society, the development of the cultural sector, more democratic governance processes etc. All these societal changes feed into network creation by providing a strong motive for its existence and a promise in its capacity to endure.

INSPIRATION AND FUNDS FOR TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

People and organisations who join forces to act as a local network might find their work to be easier and more effective if they keep an informal structure. Yet, in order to obtain the funds needed for their work, most of the times they do need some sort of organisation, be it a federation, an association, a social enterprise, a cooperative or the occasional consortiums. They also need procedures that allow accountability for finances and decision-making. The risk, of course, is an ossification of the dynamic and democratic processes.

But while managing resources can be a challenge, most people still find this easier than working in a context where there is no access to funding. In countries, regions, cities or villages where there are rudimentary instruments of support for cultural projects and the criteria used by funders do not consider long-term partnership formation, network exchanges and the structuring of the cultural scene, there is no wonder local networks are very slow to emerge.
In Europe, public funding for culture is still largely available only as grants or subventions - directed for projects or for the programmes of institutions. Even if innovation in the allocation of financial resources is happening, it still has a long way to acknowledge the different types of forms that living culture can take. It is not easy to put in place the right administrative instruments to channel funds in an accountable and impactful way to cultural actors with different types of legal personalities.

Luckily, examples of inspired funding for multilateral territorial cooperation, platforms and networks for cultural activities exist, and have been happening for years in Europe. They helped the growth of much-needed and impactful local, regional, national and European cultural structures. Particularly for the local and regional levels, the remarkable work done by the Open Society Foundation, the Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans and the European Cultural Foundation in the space of ex-Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 2000s have supported the building of managerial capacity of independent cultural organisations, directed art practices towards social change, and funded regional cooperation. Building on their input and inspiration, other local, well-connected institutions emerged, with a deep commitment to regional relevance and an aspiration to represent the voice of the cultural sector.

Even if cooperation-based projects are good training for formal local networks, they rely on different work processes and governance formats. Projects that happen in partnership are pragmatic creatures, with a limited life-span and a contractual base, where everyone has clear rights and obligations, while local networks, though they may appear similar, often remain highly informal and vague in their objectives. Likewise, a context that funds cooperation projects is not necessarily conducive to the development of local networks.
Each of us has a local network of people and organisations who are relevant to our work, and on whom we rely. This is the most common way to understand networks - the way we refer to people who stay in touch, who help each other, who find time to catch up now and then. All this we call networking. It provides for weak ties among people and organisations and could also be called our available connections.

A second way to understand a local network is as the web of connections between an organization and its stakeholders. The success of this type of network depends on the capacity of the organization to identify and manage the relations it has with others, with the ultimate goal of achieving its objectives, having more impact and being more efficient. This perspective is self-centred; it involves one organisation looking at how others can help it reach its goals. It filters the actors based on their power and on the legitimacy and urgency of the claims they make on the activities of the organization. We usually refer to this type of local network as my organisation’s network, and the awareness of its existence is an
important part of the work of any organisation, public or private. Cultural organisations and institutions benefit from reflecting on this, as it helps build a work plan to reach those that can influence their work.

Yet a third definition of local networks looks at networks as cooperation. This is no longer about placing one organisation at the core and identifying its stakeholders, nor is it about its available connections. This is an intentional process, in which actors align around a common way of thinking or a shared objective, and manage to accomplish together much more than they would have succeeded on their own. Though this is a natural way of working in the arts world, and has been developing for more than 40 years now at European level (think of international networks and platforms), when it comes to the local level, there seems to be a gap in thinking about networks.

Most of the time, local networks are seen as a tool for stakeholder management, placing one organisation in the centre. There is indeed a certain managerial value in mapping an organisation’s own network. And the capacity to discriminate among various stakeholders is needed to maintain more intentional and better relations, allowing one to understand who is central and who is peripheral, who can be an ally and who needs to be treated with concern. On the other hand, there is also a lot of richness in looking at connective structures where every actor is as important as the others.

Local network formation needs to become a process that moves from an awareness of your own local connections and stakeholders, to the inception or the participation in a local network to which your cultural organisation belongs.
Stakeholder theory, the lens through which networks are usually talked about, was developed in corporations as a pluralistic alternative to management’s perceived role exclusively as an agent of the firm’s stockholders. It penetrated the cultural management discourse once arts initiatives became more formalised, because of the grant and subvention management system and increased demands for accountability of public spending, and institutionalisation. Thus, slowly but surely, the rigours of New Public Management, coupled with the neat and tidy tools developed by the business sector, were adopted rhetorically and finally internalised.

The power of the stakeholder theory lies in its analytical sharpness; it is a tool for becoming aware of the environment in order to improve the relations an organisation has with the most important actors which can influence its work.

Tschirhart’s (1996) study of the arts sector through the lens of the stakeholder theory proposes this definition: ‘An organization’s stakeholders include its employees, volunteers, board members, funders, suppliers, clients/consumers, regulators, contractors, competitors, collaborators, and any other actor who has a stake in the organization’s performance and/or the power to affect organizational performance. A stakeholder’s claims or interests in an organization may be economic, legal, or moral. Investigating the stakeholder-management process helps us to understand the varying pressures faced by leaders in stewarding their organizations’ missions’ (cited in Thompson, 2001).

Stakeholder theory models the organization as a map consisting of a set of nodes (the stakeholders) and connections between the nodes (economic, legal or moral claims or interests). Tschirhart (1996) places stakeholders in six categories:
- internal (board, employees, volunteers),
- resource providers (funders, media, suppliers),
- political environment (lobbyists, legislators),
- community (interest groups),
- arts industry (associations, competitors, collaborators) and
- customers (advertisers, patrons).

Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) identify three attributes for ‘picking’ from the range of potential stakeholders those who are most important for a particular organization at a particular time:
- power to influence the organisation,
- legitimacy of relationship with the organisation,
- urgency of claim on the organisation.

Making such a selection among all the stakeholders of an organisation helps define a strategy of communication and involvement, choose who to address at what time and with what urgency, define proper messages and channels of communication, tone of dialogue etc.
FORMS OF SOCIAL ANARCHY

Social anarchy offers a model of how networks form and work in the cultural world. It reflects the way the creative force unravels in processes which have little to nothing in common with the formal pathways of organisational management.

The role of governance within a cultural organisation is to protect and nurture the spaces of free-movement of thinking and working that creative practitioners need. Artistic collectives, informal artistic groups and movements, networks of small cultural centres, and creative independent spaces, on the other hand, are examples of structures that try to embody in most of their forms and functions the essence of artistic work-processes as social anarchy.

The free flow of exchange is essential to the life of the network, and to understand where the power lies, one needs to look at:
- the connections each member shares with the others (centrality),
- the proportion of actual connections to total possible connections in a network (density), and
- the extent to which an actor falls on the shortest path between any two other actors (betweenness).


“Power in networks is a function of one’s connectedness to others and one’s ability to communicate and exchange resources with others in the network - it is not where you are, but who you know that matters.”

Wachhaus, 2012
V. Birth of a network

Diverse educational, civic, social and cultural partnerships are often difficult, and to bring them together in a local network is even more challenging. Work with a loose governance model and little to no hierarchy among people and organisations with different profiles, missions and discourses needs special conditions to function.

People connect spontaneously, and most networks form from pre-existing relations among actors. Their failure or success depends at the beginning on the type of their members, their motives and the history of their interactions. Trust and recognition of common goals are essential, and unsurprisingly, both the stakeholder model and the social anarchy model recognize that smaller groups are better for nurturing the emergence of networks. Often this also means that networks are personal and dependent on the people who ignited their fire and are keeping them alive.

Many of the traits that explain the formation of networks of people also explain the creation of networks of organisations.

TRUST

Organisations that have often worked in partnerships are more likely to form new and more diverse network ties and to become dominant players in networks, and these past experiences prove to be particularly important when confronted with difficulties. Also, for those who wish to start a new network, the importance of knowing others seems like a truism. Still, an astonishing number of complex collaborative projects or networks are designed without any previous experience of working together with the desired partners.

It is difficult to measure trust and to assess its effect on cooperation, yet there is a scientifically-proven wisdom that rational understanding of goals, rights and responsibilities alone is never enough to make people want to work together and share.
Mugakide – a local network grown out of friendship

Mugakide is a local network in the Basque country, overlapping the borders of France and Spain, which grew from the friendship and collaboration between a French and a Spanish artist, and expanded to integrate their organisations (Bitamine Faktoria and Nekatoenea) with the aim to support artistic creation in the region. The artists worked together as an artist collective before founding Bitamine Faktoria. After one of them moved to another city, but continued to collaborate, they realised they were working as a network - creating events and exhibitions together, helping and supporting each other. As they already had a common mission, they started to make a plan, designed a logo and became more focused and strategic. The network between Bitamine Faktoria and Nekatonea grew out of their friendship, their collaboration, and the existing confidence between them. Communication and working together closely, in all stages of development of a project, is very important to them.

’When we plan something together, we visit places together, we talk to the director together, we talk to each other afterwards. Because we are close and we are small, communication is easier. We meet each month, and we also have a creative community, so we organise joint meetings with the artists whom we’re working with.’

Local people are used to crossing the river that separates the city of Irun from the city of Hendaye (and France from Spain), and living with different cultures is common in the region. They see themselves as “cross-border people”, and this familiarity was essential for the network to emerge and to grow.

Mugakide’s work is funded with European subventions for the Euroregion, and from each of their organisation’s subsidies, in which they make sure to include a budget line for the activity of the network. The network in itself is not formalized, and for situations in which a legal structure is needed, they prefer to create temporary consortiums. The core of their common work feeds from the familiarity they share, their affinities and the proximity of their localities, and no other legal assurances are needed for their local network for the time being.

https://www.bitamine.net/c/networking/mugakide
SIMILARITY OF STATUS AND POWER

Collaboration is more likely if the actors have similar status and power. Unfortunately, this is often overlooked, especially by those with less resources and impact, who are looking to establish meaningful partnerships with much larger organisations and do not understand why they are ignored or things do not turn out the way they would like to. Of course, there are exceptions, especially when the more powerful actor makes it its strategy to develop multiple partnerships with smaller ones. But as a rule, one should consider this idea when deciding where to invest one’s energy, especially when the collaboration means working together on a topic which is peripheral to the mission of the large organisation, but essential for the smaller one.

Difference in status and power might also mean that what is a natural drive for most people in organisations – pushing their own agenda - can seriously get in the way of developing a functional network. For some, a solution could be that the network gets initiated by someone from the outside, not affiliated to any of the members, but who knows everyone and is trusted by all.

Kay Sentance is an artist based in Oxfordshire (United Kingdom) who works in theatre, conservation, design and architecture. Her artistic drive is to ‘engage people through familiar circumstances in unfamiliar settings, encouraging them to revisit everyday situations from a different perspective’. Having worked with artists from different strands of the cultural world, she aspires to develop Rural-Urban, a self-directed local network in her area. In terms of governance, Kay finds that there is a need for structure, but that the network needs to stay as open as possible, in order to accommodate individual profiles, but within the core team make sure to have people able to cover the important roles interchangingly. As initiator, her positioning is close to that of a facilitator and a ‘bridge’, and not as a ‘player’.

‘Each organisation has a different timescale and set-up, resulting in the need for us to remain very flexible towards them. A very rigid framework excludes a lot of people and jeopardises a lot of opportunities.

I work with a few like-minded people as a loose group, who are willing to help. This core group shares roles like communication and funding, and each of us could take the other’s role.

As an initiator, I think it is easier to be on the outside, and not push an institutional agenda. As an organisation, you would have your organisation at heart. In Oxford, for example, we have different such agendas, which is fair enough, however being on the outside of this culture enables us to connect better with multiple, well defined Organisations. The other important thing is to try to not only connect the arts organisations with one another (‘preaching to the converted’), but to reach a wider cross-section of the ‘non-arts sector’ and therefore have a wider understanding of the influence of the Arts in other walks of life.’

http://kaysentance.com/about.htm
https://www.artwash.co.uk/about
https://www.r-u.org.uk/
PROXIMITY

Sharing the territory, being in the vicinity, makes people and organisations share potential audiences, most likely confront the same issues and be exposed to similar challenges. But in order to work together and be a network, territorial proximity is not enough. A perception of common roots – the ‘logic of belonging’ –, and a shared system of values and understanding of the local - a ‘logic of similarity’ are essential (Torre, 2010, cited in Arnaud, Soldo and Keramidas, 2012).

Cognitive proximity, the term theorists used to express this closeness in thinking, can be nurtured via habits and routine, either via community events or writing a common strategy matching values with action. A community of beliefs and knowledge can be grown intentionally through a coherent and persistent value-based discourse, matched with a practice that is in tune with those same values reflected in the communication.

Replika Educational Theatre Centre – a cultural space that relies on implicit local and national networks

Replika Educational Theatre Centre from Bucharest (Romania) is a cultural space run by the Replika Cultural Association, whose aim is to advance social and educational themes via professional theatre and drama workshops in schools. The space came to life when the artists, who first tried to promote their ideas in an institutional frame, felt it was almost impossible to produce the type of works that they wanted to perform in a public theatre. They found that institutions fear to tackle delicate, sensitive issues which deal with the life of youngsters, and that their understanding of public cultural management leaves little room for such social and educational goals.

‘One of the aims of the space was to offer free entrance to all the activities in the Centre, thus improving access to culture and education for many categories deprived...
of those fundamental rights. The need to develop educational activities was an organic continuation of the values that the artists promoted: theatre is a tool for social emancipation, drama can create solidarity and empathy, fundamental for enriching the young generations.’

Even though Replika Centre develops many theatrical and educational projects deeply connected to communities, it is still very difficult for them to get public funds and to create long-term programs. Paying the rent and providing reasonable fees for those involved is challenging enough. This is one of the reasons many independent theatre NGOs in Bucharest were born and started to work together as an implicit informal network, sharing partnership agreements for funding programmes and different resources from each organisation, in order to get things done.

Replika is part of an implicit local and national network, where the same people become involved in multiple projects and organisations, and help each other obtain needed resources such as space, promotion and expertise. Thinking along the same lines and having similar or identical values fuels this long-term collaboration. Furthermore, in the case of Replica, their mission revolves around the concept of education, a social ideal, with theatre seen as a tool towards achieving it, which has a multidisciplinary web of people and other organisations that believe in the same goal. This proximity of hope, rather than of art forms, is seen as a useful key for more powerful and durable work as a network.

https://centrulreplika.com/

SITUATIONS OF COMMON HOPE AND ACTION

Networks are not so much known for the efficiency of their joint action, but for the impact created by the free exchange of ideas and resources among members, and decision-making paths that allow for participation and openness among actors.

In such structures, a single and definitive point of coordination is not needed, and might even harm the network. Instead, what works is the creation of situations where people and organisations can propose ideas for shared plans, are empowered to carry out the initiative and invite others to join voluntarily.

When this happens before the birth of the network, it helps to build trust, hope and a potential for action. Joint projects such as festivals or conferences, if they are organised in a collaborative way, can frame and fuel network formation and sustainability. When they are the result of the involvement of people and organisations from different sectors, the interplay of common values and social goals will also reinforce cognitive proximity. They can even spark a stronger involvement in the governance of the territory.
Termokiss – a cultural centre that puts empowerment and representation at the core

In 2016, a group of young people came upon an unfinished, abandoned concrete heating factory in a south-western neighbourhood of Prishtina, in Kosovo, and decided to turn it into a community centre. They wanted both the programme and the organizing processes to be managed by the community at large, and the space to be available for any activity as long as it was non-profit. The key to this was (long) weekly meetings open to both members and non-members, where everyone had equal power to propose and decide.

‘We had to be established as an NGO, in order to have proper papers and to get the support of the municipality. But that is really only a technical umbrella, because we decided that Termokiss would use weekly meetings as our main organisation channel. We really wanted to leave it as open as possible for experimentation and other people’s suggestions, instead of trying to impose some kind of community ideology. For us, just having an open space with an open agenda was a start that gathered people from different backgrounds, different regions, and different interests.’

Over the years, they have managed to keep a fluid profile, in a constant state of definition, based on the needs and ideas of their community. They talk about ‘embracing the present’, which means embracing the current (quite difficult) conditions in which they find themselves, and growing in the direction their community decides to grow.

Interestingly, in this network model, the Board as a governance structure becomes meaningless - just a technical tool for legal matters. Termokiss even considers that dis-empowering its own NGO structure actually encourages people to get more involved.

Keys to this approach are mutual respect and time spent on personal communication without any technical jargon. Despite its informality, Termokiss has shown political clout by successfully lobbying national public administration to change its rules about the use of empty spaces, allowing them to be taken over by other social or cultural projects.

http://termokiss.space/
VI. The Life of a network

- What is the structure of your General Assembly meetings?
- What is your coordination team helpful at?
- What communication channels exist among your members?
- How do the members of your local network group together?
- What themes/roles/clusters create sub-groups inside the network?
- What kind of reciprocity norms does the network have?
- What is the main role of your Board?
- What is your response to a potentially damaging action by one of your members?
- What is the structure of your General Assembly meetings?
- What are the core values of your network?
- What is the vision of your local network?
- What is the mission of your local network?
- What is the most rewarding type of communication for your local network?
- What is the most efficient type of communication for your local network?
- What are the core values of your network?
- What signs do you look for to know that you are on the right track in your work as a local network?
- How does your network celebrate success?
- How does your network highlight the specific merits of your members?
- Who are the connectors in your network?
- Who are the facilitators?
- Who are the bridgers?
- Which members often come up with new ideas for the network to develop? Are they willing to coordinate this development?
- Which members often show up to join ideas proposed by others?
- How could you encourage more members to come up with new ideas/projects for the network?
- What specific people could help improve your local network?
- What could motivate them to join the network?
GOVERNANCE

Governance is all about direction and coordination; it speaks about the relations that are shaped between actors to make the structure function towards a certain goal. A board, a general assembly and an administrative core are usually found in most NGOs, but how do they work in the case of a local network? With a flatter hierarchy and a free flow of information among actors, local networks need to put in place processes that stay true to their personality.

The General Assembly (GA) – described as the reunion of all members of an organisation, the GA of a local network is more active than in a typical organisation. The life of the network depends on its capacity to facilitate communication and collaboration among all actors, so regular GA meetings are very important in the case of an institutionalised network, especially if members find it hard to have regular meetings otherwise. More informal, social ones overlap the GA’s role with the constant reunion of all members and a good structure of meetings, consultations, deliberations.

The Board – in Europe it usually has a strategic, decision-making role and it oversees the implementation of the work plan, reporting to the General Assembly. It can also work as a support structure for the organisation, gathering people or organisations which can help it grow, providing different types of resources and creating positive links to other actors.

In the case of local networks, the decision-making and control layer of the Board can be a burden for the free-flow of information and horizontal type of decision-making that is essential to its functioning. Nevertheless, it remains an essential tool for accountability and can be a motivating arena to gather expertise and links with third parties.

The Coordination Office – even if local networks are free creatures, they require facilitation, nourishment and a design of the patterns of communication among actors and non-actors. A small team of people that structures, gives impulses and pushes the work of the network is needed. This coordination body is not in charge of running and overseeing the work processes of the local network, as in the case of an organisation. Its main role should be to:

- steer the discussions towards common points of interest;
- maintain an understanding of the purpose of the local network as a distinct entity from its actors;
- facilitate the exchange of different points of view;
- keep communication lines open among members;
- implement the initiatives that require formal accountability, for example (co)management of grant applications, production and communication activities, finance management.

One of the main possible challenges of any coordination office is to be clear on what projects and initiatives belong to the network, and what represents...
the work of its actors, on their own or working in collaboration. This relation between common and own initiatives results from the way the local network relates to the activities of its members. When this is clear, and the network deals only with specific tasks and activities that its members have delegated to it – like advocacy, or the running of a shared building – the challenge is quite easy. But when the network decides to address themes, functions and objectives of common interest, which overlap with the activities of members, more deliberation is needed.

One solution is to make networks act as an implementation platform for the ideas of the members, and to co-manage the projects with them. Another way is to make a clear cut between the initiatives of members and the work of the network.

Clusters – in the case of networks with many member-actors which find it difficult to meet regularly, exchange information regularly and reach decisions easily, an organisation based on sub-networks or clusters works best. The goal of this structural design is to have short paths and relatively few ties among those in the same cluster or subnetwork, and to make sure that everyone finds it is easy to get in touch with someone else from another sub-network or cluster.

The aimed result of this type of organisation is to help the flow of resources (good vibes, information, money, ideas, requests) among clusters, so that everyone feels the benefits of participation and a connection to others. The design of communication channels, working groups and decision-making tools to support this result are essential tasks of the Coordination Office, together with the Board (if there is one) and can also be mentioned in the Statutes of the network.

Reciprocity norms – one of the biggest challenges is to keep the members engaged, while allowing them to decide on the time and the resources they wish to contribute with. Free-riding – expecting benefits without contributing - can result in frustration. The same goes for declarative enthusiasm, followed by a lack of interest or participation. The problems become more serious when one of the actors acts in a way which is contrary to the network values or brings a prejudice to the whole structure.

While there is no definitive solution, setting up joint goals and reciprocity norms can help actors deal with both problems and opportunities (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai, 2004). They build common vision and trust between actors, make them feel appreciated for their contribution and assure them of the support they can receive in times of need. They should also include from the start a common decision on how to respond to a potential damaging action of a member.

Simple communication – the free exchange of resources and the easy flow of information are essential. Direct and short paths of communication are needed. The basic is a list of emails and phone numbers made available among members of the network, but the most powerful ‘tool’ is showing a will to be approached by other actors, and to remove unnecessary bureaucratic or administrative obstacles that hinder the dialogue. This means that commitment to the network needs to be present at all levels of the organisation, including its leadership. Good-old regular meetings that allow easy, frank and direct communication are still the best tools out there.
Rete delle Case del Quartiere – a local network of neighbourhood houses

Rete delle Case del Quartiere from Turin (Italy) is a local network of community ‘houses’ with different statuses and administration – some are run by foundation, some by associations, others by cooperatives, but all share a core idea of how to work with people.

Over the years, as they responded to similar needs in their communities, the neighbourhood houses realised that they had similar founders, beneficiaries and stakeholders, so they began to work together in order to be more effective in serving each of their communities. They share logistics and provide each other with specific skilled expertise, so when the local group of citizens or small organisations they work with come up with ideas in their area, each house can ‘borrow’ intelligence from the others.

Some funding opportunities are also better addressed with larger consortiums of organisations, and working as a network helps build partner consortiums for national-level funding opportunities. As most of the houses are hosted in buildings that belong to the city, they have a common agreement with the city administration, and they participate in local policy making. Whenever the city has a project that needs citizen engagement, they consult and engage the network to reach them. It may sometimes be difficult for very similar organisations to come together as a network, because they risk seeing each other as potential competitors. Community houses/centres, though they have much the same mission and do comparable activities, keep their uniqueness because they serve geographic areas that do not overlap.

‘The Houses host cultural, artistic and social activities; courses, workshops, family services. They can be very different in their structure, but they rely on the same principles: they are based on the active participation of local organisations and neighbours who propose activities each year, and they are open to everybody regardless of age, culture or geographical origin etc.’

One of their challenges is to draw a clear line between the activities of the network and those of its members. For some types of activities, usually the more technical ones, like ‘communication, fundraising, applying to European projects, the network has a role to play, but for other kinds of projects that require neighbourhood outreach, it is not always clear. Sometimes we change our mind according to the opportunities – if there is a call for proposals in which just one organisation can participate, then each member may apply separately, so to have are more chances. In the case of fundraising activities, we often discuss whether to channel the funds only to members, who then pay the network for the fundraising tasks, or if it’s better for the network to also raise funds for its own specific work.’

http://www.retecasedelquartiere.org/
IDENTITY AND IMAGE

Identity is important because it provides guidance for decision-making.

‘In order to make successful strategic choices, a not-for-profit organization must first understand what it is and what it does.’

(Young, 2001, cited in Boyle, 2003)

Strategy is not what people write down, but what they collectively think and understand (Wells, 1998). The state of indeterminacy of local networks means that a set-in-stone mission, vision and 3-5 years goals are not so important for its work, when looked at from the inside. The process of negotiation and recurrent discussion on values, intentions, needs and coming to a joint conclusion is actually the key ingredient for a shared outlook and agreement on what is to be done next. Nevertheless, for outsiders, identity, image and a publicly known strategy matter, because they represent a promise made to others. Functioning as a value-reference, these help stakeholders give their opinion and contribute to the work of the network.

Rojc Alliance – a network of organisations that shares a space

Rojc Alliance from Pula (Croatia) is a local network of 22 organisations out of a total of 108 who work together in the largest building of the city dedicated to civic activities. It was established in 2011 to set up rules for the cultural groups that were using the available spaces, in order to build a better centre for all. In Rojc there are various organisations from different fields - sports, culture, disability service providers, sport fans, scouts, etc.-, and the challenge is to gather them, represent their interests, and help them connect and network.

‘The most important challenges we face in our work are keeping the mission clear for everyone, having a good picture of where we stand in relation to that mission, and communicating face-to-face with our members as often as possible.’

They coordinate the space that can be used both by members and non-members, manage a community café, where anyone can organise educational activities, broadcast on the community radio, organise concerts. While the administrative part of managing the common space is dealt with by Rojc, the cultural programme is the responsibility of the individual organisations. They work in the frame of a public-civic partnership with the municipality, as a new type of administrative governance of buildings that host the activity of cultural actors in Croatia.

Rojc Alliance engages with its members in a predictable and strategic way, with a participative planning process and annual meetings to discuss tactics and implementation. They are involved in advancing causes of mutual interest, like advocacy towards policy-makers.

https://rojcnet.pula.org/
www.radio.rojc.eu
DEMOCRATIC MANAGEMENT

To manage a group on egalitarian principles demands a set of competences that facilitate non-hierarchical organisation and interaction, as well as a culture of support and care. In a world of increased formalisation of work in culture, where grant and subvention management has resulted in culture organisations being pushed to behave like a bureaucracy, it is not easy to find training programmes or situations that shape such skills. Knowledge of how to work within a network cannot be assumed for people that have coordinated multilateral, cooperation projects.

Certain roles within the network need to be covered, but most importantly, a certain organisational culture needs to prevail in the network.

Specific roles are:

**Connectors** - critical in connecting the network to other actors

**Facilitators** - critical in decision-making situation, including conflict-resolution

**Bridgers** - critical in maintaining / increasing integration among members

They all have in common the need to show empathy, a mind wide open to a multitude of perspectives, interest in meeting others, good knowledge of the network’s actors and of the values it is built on, a lifelong learning approach and good facilitation skills.

IKULT – an umbrella network for local and national actors and communities

IKULT from Austria develops intercultural projects and concepts based on participative networking at the intersection of education, culture and art. Their work relies on strong networks and co-creation between municipalities; operators from the sectors of adult education, educational guidance and tourism; cultural centres; media, cultural and social institutions; and volunteers, refugees, artists and musicians. Interculturality and digitalization are their main topics.

‘We co-create individual community projects with local people. We provide a fine network structure with a lot of experts and possibilities they can connect with if needed. In doing so, we build and serve community education processes from bottom-up, while they bring new ideas, people and projects, let’s say possibilities, through networking, into these areas. There are formats like theatre workshops, educational guided tours, discussion forums with filmmakers, discussion with EU-politicians, interreligious dialogues, webinars about the changes and challenges in volunteer work, etc.’

IKULT and their projects function as an umbrella networking association for local and national actors and communities, pooling their competences and bringing the member-actors together.

Their governance structure involves two core people who are in charge of coordination, an advisory board, and a large number of collaborators and networking partners.

The integration of new ideas and projects in educational institutions, and the development of cooperation projects are their main work strategies.

https://ikult.network/
Being part of a local network is a value in itself; non-hierarchical common work and dialogue create a web of trust and solidarity, which are markers of well-being in a society.

Local networks need a rich investment of time and energy from its member-actors, and require a type of management which is not coercive, nor too formalised, in order for information to flow and for people to feel appreciated and included, and develop a sense of belonging.

This type of management should aim to create situations where people are invited to step forward, propose new projects and ideas to the others and facilitate this common work, with care to prevent both burnout and free-riding.

Barnteaterakademin – a creative network for the growth of new drama for young audiences

Barnteaterakademin (The Children’s Theatre Academy) is a non-profit project based in Gothenburg (Sweden), which supports new drama for young audiences. It connects different actors from the field of children’s culture and offers a space for reflection and research. Mainly funded by the Culture Committee of Gothenburg, Barnteaterakademin is politically initiated and has a lean organisation, well-rooted in the local and regional theatre fields.

‘The work is led by a project manager appointed by the Culture Committee of Gothenburg and supported by a steering group with solid representation of different artistic professions and theatres. This steering group offers a vivid and creative network of different partners. It connects institutions and independent theatre groups in collaboration, and offers a context where representatives from cultural and educational sectors as well as city districts and administration meet. These representatives can be changed over time, so people may rotate, but the structure remains and is a key to the sustainability of the network.’

Shared responsibility in the steering group means the members are engaged, and cooperation and networking within the network give both smaller and larger institutions the opportunity to develop their competence and repertoire. Also, being part of the network means they are reaching a wider audience through their artistic activities.

http://www.barnteaterakademin.se/
THE FEELING OF A NETWORK

By now you might have figured out that a local network is not just another type of organisation, but a special creature, which many people would actually find difficult to work with in the beginning. The pervasive discourse of hierarchy, division of work and formalisation of work processes has so permeated the cultural world that even smaller cultural centres sometimes talk about management is the same way that a big business corporation would, and with similar standards of efficiency and efficacy. When they fail or struggle to accommodate it, they blame themselves for not being proficient enough or not being sufficiently supported to develop properly. The approach is rarely questioned.

A new way of working, required by a local network, needs specific governance structures, certain roles to be covered and special management competences.

The fuel of the local network is the feeling of membership in a community of beliefs and knowledge. It can be grown through habits and routine, but mostly by encouraging work processes based on trust, reciprocity and a common vision.

Celebration of success – who would think this would need mentioning, but yes, often in the frenzy of daily tasks we forget to celebrate the effort and the impact of our work, to organise moments to come together with joy and gratefulness for what we have done and the results we have achieved as a collective. In local networks where actors do not meet often, personal connection can sometimes dry out. Such celebrations can keep a good vibe and energy flowing within the network. Sharing success is even more important, as it provides everyone a chance to feel they have contributed and are recognised for that.

JADRO - an association of the independent cultural scene

The Association of Artists Cultural Centre Media Artes grew from the companionship of two young theatre professionals who felt that the cultural life in Ohrid, their hometown in North Macedonia, lacked a certain type of artistic practice that could really engage young people and be more democratic and respectful in the way cultural practitioners worked with each other.

Through the Art for Social Change programme of the European Cultural Foundation they got in touch with other like-minded people, including Iskra Geshoska, a theoretician and cultural manager living and working in Skopje. For many years her cultural NGO Kontrapunkt nurtured the connections and collaboration between independent cultural operators (including Media Artes) in different parts of the country. She helped create bridges between culture professionals from the ex-Yugoslav space.
With the inspiration and support from peers and colleagues from the Croatian independent cultural scene, JADRO was formed in 2012 as a national association, with already an experience of working bilaterally for a decade.

‘The network grew because of a feeling of needing to move beyond the border of our own country and be in touch with people from the ex-Yugoslav space, with whom we knew we shared roots, identity and a broader cultural space.’

Croatian colleagues from Pogon offered mentorship and inspiration for advocacy towards the recognition of independent culture as a provider of public culture in Macedonia, which led to the creation of a new model of institution: Social Cultural Space CENTRE - JADRO. JADRO is a space for the activities of the network and it works based on a co-governance model of mixed-ownership of public - civic partnerships.

https://www.jadroasocijacija.org.mk
VII. Triggers of change

How does it deal with new opportunities?

How does it address challenges?

What are the main triggers of change in your network?

When your network looks for funding, what is it careful not to do?

What do the initiatives of your local network focus on?

Does your network have a legal personality? Or not? Do you consider this important either way?

How do the actions of your network overlap with those of its members? Never? Sometimes? Often? Does your network act as a platform for its members’ ideas?

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Not every shift outside or inside of our organisations can be weathered through. A collapse of available funding opportunities, a change of priorities decided by public authorities or other stakeholders of the actors, a community crisis that is not in the power of the network to address, personal changes in the lives of key people, new patterns of communication which take time to adjust to, all these can have tremendous consequences on an organisation, and also on a network.

New opportunities can keep members from being active in the network and distract their attention from its work. This can be an effect of getting new information and resources, but it can also be the result of a too rapid expansion of the network. The tension between the hope of acquiring new means and the fear of losing control over one’s own resources may help to explain network growth, shrinking and change. This is sometimes the case...
when organizations find themselves in a local network together with others whom they perceive as competitors, or when external funding or partnering conditions change dramatically.

A good example of this is the European Capitals of Culture programme. The city that wishes to win the title must put together a convincing programme, which relies, among others, on the commitment of local cultural actors. If the title is won, the city becomes a magnet for tourists and investment, and attracts the attention of big cultural players, who start to dominate the art scene. Among small organisations, some will step forward and gain more resources and status. The local networks in which they are embedded must also deal with this change in discourse, power relations, interests and funding.

The ECoC programme, with its preference for large events and for the cultural industries, is very challenging for the independent art scene and authentic local networks. They face a difficult choice between conforming and compromising, accepting or refusing the extra resources and attention, adapting or taking a critical stand.

Cluj Cultural Centre – a collaborative city platform for culture and urban development

The Cluj Cultural Centre in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) mediates collaborations between different sectors and mobilises culture for social transformation and urban development. They develop a programme that addresses strategic urban themes such as well-being, the future of work, social inclusion, urban regeneration, and social and structural innovation. The initiative actually implements the entire programme developed for the city’s candidacy for the European Capital of Culture 2021 title - it is probably the only city to do so after engaging in the ECoC bidding process without being awarded with the title. It has 95 members: the Cluj-Napoca Municipality, the Cluj County Council and cultural institutions and organisations, all the universities in Cluj-Napoca, as well as many business clubs and clusters, and civil society organisations.

‘Among the most remarkable initiatives of the Centre is the Cultural Voucher - an instrument for increasing access to culture for groups with low cultural participation – and Culture Next - Candidate Cities Network, a platform of 15 former ECoC candidate cities that are committed to culture-led urban development.’

The projects developed within a participatory framework during the ECoC candidacy are currently being implemented by a team of 21 people and a wider local network of professionals, organisations, companies and institutions from the sectors of culture, research, education and urban development. Each project’s programming is done by a board of local experts and member organisations. Regular meetings and consultations like Concentric, Urban Dialogues and the Partial Assembly create the context for local actors to connect, exchange experiences and define priorities and joint action.

https://cccluj.ro/
ACCOUNTABILITY

Public funding and support are essential for education, production, promotion, touring, mediation and training in the arts. Subventions, grants and tenders come with specific requirements of accountability, a need for responsible spending and a quantifiable public impact. Local networks that wish to get such resources must conform to the legal and financial requirements of the available system. This puts pressure on the actors and changes the relations between them: the need for personal and organisational representation and responsibility can be seen as either a burden of maturity or as a choice to enter another state of activity. Actors may also find themselves in competition with the local network which they belong to. One of the typical challenges faced by networks is to draw a line between the causes and the projects it runs, and those claimed by its members.

Finally, if they wish to engage in advocacy, local networks need to find a common voice, and to delegate the task. This implies having a governance structure and processes that the actors trust to rightfully represent them.

Conflict and misunderstandings can greatly impact networks, as they are first and foremost the result of affinities and personal connections among people, not organisations. Free-riding – taking advantage of the networks’ benefits without pooling in resources and interest in its work -, taking the lead or taking sole credit for common work, are just three of the most common issues that can generate tension and affect the work of a network. As the structure formalizes and the actor organisations become stronger, these questions become less important, yet due to the very nature of the network, they will never become irrelevant.

Kulturanova - an organisation functioning as a local network

Kulturanova from Novisad (Serbia) functions as a local network, and the core motivation of people joining the organisation is strengthening the sustainability of their own work. The organisation grew out of the friendship of artists who knew each other since university, when they wanted to work together to build a cultural offer different to the one existing in their city at the time. It developed organically and almost unintentionally, and took the shape of a network because of the way the funds were granted: by artistic discipline. Kulturanova took these artistic disciplines and organised itself around them. That meant that the organisation tried to work in six different artistic fields, was interdisciplinary from the beginning and had a strong ratio of collaborators, some of which continue to work with the organisation today.
The foundation of Kulturanova was rooted in the desire for change which fuelled young people living in the countries of former Yugoslavia after the war in the 90s.

'We started when we were students just out of high school. We wanted to change something, find new approaches to culture in terms of content, that would somehow contextualize the reality that we were experiencing. It was just after the war, and we were the generation that was fed up with fighting and the hatred that existed and still exists. We wanted to make something, to make a difference.

We were proud to gather 200 young people at our first assembly. It was a time of hope. Disappointment came a bit later.

Geopolitically the Balkans as a region was interesting for the funders because of the reconciliation process. First of all, you had the funds, and secondly you had the people willing to collaborate. That happened not only in Serbia but also in the other countries of ex-Yugoslavia, and through those networks we were able to meet people with whom later we developed collaborations in the region. Socially, at that time we were actually quite a poor country, just starting to come out of a recession, so basically you could make a relatively decent living, compared to other jobs, by doing something that you liked.'

Kulturanova has relatively few formal members, but many collaborators, who are invited to propose projects that can be implemented in collaboration with the core team of the organisation. The institution perceives itself as fragile, and the people often leave quickly, as they continue their studies or projects elsewhere, but the glue that binds them together is their desire to make a change in society. For members and collaborators, it offers opportunities to travel and work with different cultures, a taste of interculturalism which they feel is needed in a society where it is perceived as scarce.

http://www.kulturanova.org/
INSTITUTIONALISATION

Moving from an informal to a bureaucratic network will most likely change the power relations and ossify the structure. In order to keep the spirit of the network alive and the flow of good energy and resources smooth, actors need to trust each other and to see the new organisation as a tool that helps them achieve their common dream, not as an objective in itself.

As the network starts to function as a formal institution, the relations between actors begin to depend not only on the active people, but also on others with decision-making power in their organisations. Yet, local networks are firstly networks of people, not organisations. Trust and affinities shared by some cannot be always easily transferred to others working in the same organisation.

**Institutionalisation is also a political act; it represents its actors and it is a reference for others.** An activist local network that aims not only to be a syndicate of its professional actors, but also to affirm and respond to the social cause of the citizens on its territory, needs to become a platform that makes them visible.

An open door for newcomers and a not-too formal core management team is a practical way to make networks stay accessible and to refresh their life-energy.

**Bureaucracy brings structure and discipline, but too much order kills the creative vibe.** Move things slowly from informal to formal networks, and if the motivation lies mainly in the resources you hope to obtain, consider temporary consortiums and partnerships instead.
ARTfactories/Autre(s) pARTs – a national platform for trans-local actions

ARTfactories/Autre(s) pARTs is a French national network grown around the concept of the trans-local - they connect local level initiatives and seen themselves as 'a common platform for thinking, research and action, transmission and solidarity for the development of art centres that organize their practices and experiments around the relationship between arts, territories and populations.

Their work in Marseille (France), which is one the places from which the national network grew from, speaks of the city's independent scene as 'a little world in itself, with a strong local network, where the culture of the people is rooted in this very old idea of democracy. Everyone is concerned about the rule of the city; everyone feels they have the right and responsibility for the city. So, this sometimes means that there is a lot of conflict as well'.

ARTfactories developed an intervention in the city in 2012-2013, exploring the place of experimentation of citizen engagement in the creation of 'new territories for the art' in the context of the European Capital of Culture programme. Their experience is that a high density of artistic initiatives makes the process of growing a local network take longer:

'There is a need to build a common organization, to build a common feeling of recognition, and the first reaction of this kind of actors and places is to distinguish themselves one from the other, not to recognize in the other. The idea that they are unique and no one is like them is very common in this kind of action. What did function in Marseille in the sense of building and awareness of the existence of a local network, of a local reality, is the emergence of a process of structuring of coordination on the national level of intermediary. By opening this community on national level we increased awareness of a lot of local actors of what was going on at the local level. The idea of this national-level community was to empower the local dynamic of making the field stronger, on the local level. And that is something that worked for Marseille, because through it we built a discussion the local dynamics of organizations.'

http://autresparts.org/en/
http://www.artfactories.net/index.php
The intent to work together is natural, and should not need an explanation. On the other hand, certain traits of the local environment can hinder or even undermine the emergence of local networks and collaboration.

Where competition is the core principle around which resources are accessed and distributed, and these resources are scarce throughout the territory, local networks are slow to emerge, especially among organisations that perceive each other as similar and, thus, in (potential) competition.

The evaluation criteria of grant proposals can play such a role. When cooperation and genuine partnerships are not taken into account in the decision to fund a project or a programme, or to evaluate the work of a cultural institution, local networks have a hard life. Public consultations that favour networks, platforms and other types of associations over individual actors also support the structuring of the cultural sector and the formation of networks.

Public authorities have a decisive role in nurturing the emergence of webs of trust, learning, exchange and cooperation in fragmented and competitive cultural communities, where organizations do not have compelling motives to get together.

FUNDING

Municipalities, regional and national authorities can develop funding schemes which are friendly to networks. This can be done in many ways:

- by funding local networks (through grants, subventions or tenders),
- by funding individual organisations whose work includes taking part in the local network,
- by funding concrete projects and programmes developed by the local network.
Local networks can only live if the web of trust is strong and the flow of resources circulates through their veins and reaches all the actors. They also need governance structures that fit their personality, and designing them is often a trial and error process, which takes time and energy. Often, these governance structures get copied from other networks or from the work of other types of organisations, which hinders the network’s development and may even create conflict among actors.

If public authorities care for the networks active on their territory, they need to invest in governance processes that make them work. Much of the work done by local networks is about coordination, facilitation and communication. These activities, which are often ignored by funders, are core for the emergence, sustainability and development of the network even more than they are for regular organisations.

TanzNetzDresden - a self-governed and non-hierarchical network of artists

TanzNetzDresden (Germany) is a creative communication network that acts as a platform for dancers, choreographers, actors, dance pedagogues and educators, costume and stage designers, and artists in many other branches in the field of contemporary dance. It is not affiliated with a particular space or theatre, but dedicated to freelance creators. The network represents their interests and channels them to the public administration and the general public.

‘For the city administration, the network serves as an innovative tool to support the freelance dance scene in the city: not organized in any usual way, not a foundation, not a society, but a purely informal structure with a small management entity through a non-profit organization, which does not interfere with the content. It is diverse and pluralistic, but still gives the administration one main intermediary to speak with when it comes to strategic strengthening and support of the independent dance scene.’

Currently 31 artists are members of TanzNetz and 80 artists are connected to it. They address different topics through specific working groups such as ‘festivals’, ‘new formats’, ‘cultural policies’, ‘training’, ‘documentation’, ‘spaces’, etc. A non-profit organization takes care of funding admin for the network, while a salaried project coordinator offers advice and technical support about funding, cultural policy and communication to members. Funding for the network comes from the Foundation for Culture of the State of Saxony, from the City of Dresden and the civil foundation of Dresden.

http://www.tanznetzdresden.de/
CONSULTATION AND ADVOCACY

In places where public authorities make it a habit to consider the opinions of the cultural sector in decisions about policy priorities, strategies and funding, local networks will be encouraged to emerge.

Consultation processes nurture mutual understanding and exchange among participants, as well as an awareness of their common values and interests. Public authorities and local actors need to take into account that the skills needed to be a powerful and competent voice of the sector, or to create specific alliances geared at advocacy towards public authorities, are easier to develop in networks than in singular organisations.

Advocacy competencies, including the knowledge resources about the cultural life of a territory or the situation of a segment of the cultural world, are costly and scarce. By pooling together resources and acting as a network, actors can be much more efficient and impactful in making their voices heard.

Belfast City Council (Northern Ireland, United Kingdom) created the Belfast Festivals Forum in 2009 as the city’s many festivals wanted to collaborate, but also because their diaries were clashing and they had common marketing and training needs. The administration later decided to back up the creation of a Belfast Visual Arts Forum (in 2016) as well, as the sector required additional support, including to individual artists and studios.

‘The forums help the sectors stay connected, including with the city administration, which creates a good network of mutual knowledge and support. Also, joined-up approaches can save time and money, and the resources help the sectors to articulate their value to the public, to funders, and to statutory bodies.’

Both Forums meet regularly throughout the year and have their own budget provided
Local networks: (a guide to) reimagining the work of cultural organisations

by the city council. Key outcomes of their work include: over 80 billboard sites per year to help festivals promote themselves; large flagpole banners across the city at welcome points; sector-specific training and best practice visits; annual events and conferences with regional and national reach; purchase of resources that can be shared across organisations; development of ‘Late Night Art’ product – packaging and branding; a popular City Art Map and event website, and a gallery media tour that generated over £4.1 million of media coverage.

Over the years the city council has learned that it needs to ensure that the steering groups of the networks are empowered to make decisions and take the lead with projects, so that the development comes from grass roots, rather than be seen as a city administration function.

They also found that it’s important for forums to include those organisations that have a well-defined role in the cultural life of the city. From a sustainability point of view, one of the main challenges of the Belfast City Council is to define a process through which these Forums work as voluntary collectives formally established as independent organisations running on limited financial resources.

http://jagocommunications.com/case_study/belfastvisualarts/

NEW LOCAL NETWORKS

Certain cultural ecosystems are so fragmented, that they need an impulse for a structuring effect to take place, and to create the conditions for a local network to emerge. For public authorities, encouraging the emergence of such an organisational creature is both a policy and a political act.

Formulating values and a goal for such a local network is needed, but the actual selection of actors is best done not by public servants, but by the community itself. They should be given the chance for self-management, so that the work is not designed as an administrative tool of public authorities.

Governance structures, such as the composition of the board and the instruments for decision-making and accountability are important. In a highly competitive and conflict-driven sector, ensuring balance in the composition of the board or the steering committee through the supervision of public authorities could work best, while in a cooperative environment, actors could be entrusted to do this themselves.
Chemnitz – impulses towards cooperative formats based on participation

The city administration of Chemnitz (Germany) has been bringing together cultural and creative organisations, and developing local networks of cultural and creative spaces and actors since two decades already. A cultural strategy started to be developed in 2016, with a focus on the involvement of cultural actors and stakeholders in the city’s cultural urban development, and a clear structure and framework for such participation. The community was strengthened through meetings, thematic focus groups and workshops.

The strategy was adopted by the municipal council in 2019 and now artists, cultural organisations, politicians and partners from the economy are working together to implement the goals. Local networks are also closely connected with the city administration when it comes to topics like urban development, environment and urban design.

At the same time, the City of Chemnitz is applying to be the European Capital of Culture in 2025. A Programme Council and a Friends Association Chemnitz2025 have been formed. The application process also acted as a catalyst for the cultural landscape in Chemnitz. Yet another factor that has ignited the development of local networks are the incidents that took place in Chemnitz in 2018. Chemnitz is the third largest city in the East of Germany, but was still relatively unknown despite having a lot to offer. However, the city hit the headlines in August 2018 when a far-right protest turned into a witch hunt targeting refugees welcomed by the city. International newspapers and media were suddenly able to place Chemnitz on the map, but the coverage did not show a full story of what Chemnitz was. ‘There are more of us’ was the message of a rock concert that rallied thousands of people and showed how Chemnitz is giving space to culture, creativity and pilot initiatives. As a result, the local networks became even closer and developed cooperative formats based on participation.

‘The network that has emerged is not fixed; instead, the exchanges take place on different levels within the framework of different formats, for example the ‘Jour-Fixe for Cultural Education’ (coordinated by the Cultural Office of the City of Chemnitz) and, since October 2018, the monthly ‘Jour-Fixe Kultur’ (organised through the Friends Association Chemnitz2025) as an exemplary forum for exchange around selected cultural topics and the cultural and educational policies of the city. The event format provides a platform for representatives from the cultural sector, politics, city administration, the local economy and residents to discuss the bid, current issues and future prospects.’

[Links]
www.chemnitz.de/Kulturstrategie
PROGRAMMES AND EVENTS

Sometimes, local networks can be a by-product of other initiatives by public authorities. For example, a cultural programme that brings together regional interests and resources and matches them with skilled artists, who then dive into the community for inspiration and co-creation, can build links which are highly conducive to the emergence of local networks.

A programme that aims to have such a structuring effect needs to be aware of the need to nurture the creation of webs of trusts and common experiences not only among local actors, but also regionally, among the localities involved in the programme. Organizing regular events where experiences and results can be shared, such as forums or conferences, will give local actors a floor to show meaningful results, be inspired and come up with ideas for new initiatives. While this is not yet a local-regional network, it makes for an excellent base for collaboration, exchange and learning.

Matchbox – artists, places and local people coming together

Matchbox is a project of the Cultural Office of the Rhine-Neckar metropolitan region in Germany, which matches artists from the fields of theatre, dance, performance, visual art, music and literature to towns and audiences throughout the region. It targets local audiences and focuses on specific places, while matching them to artists of international renown, whose work radiates beyond regional and national borders.

'The starting point of each Matchbox project is a talk with the municipalities and meetings with new artists or collaborators from previous editions. This research phase is followed by discussions between the local authorities and the artists, to see if they can work together well (and match'). Once both sides’ involvement is confirmed, workshops with inhabitants and local cultural players are set up to identify local themes for the artists to work on. The role of the local authority is to facilitate this participatory process. After all, this unique art and culture
programme is about offering citizens the chance to not only witness but experience and participate in the artistic process. The individual projects become social events, creating exceptional and collective spaces, and Matchbox is a format that invites, or even requires participation. This is art concerned with the real lives of people, taking on their working world, turning them into subjects or even protagonists.’

Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar GmbH is based in Mannheim (Germany) and was founded in 2006 by the association Zukunft Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar, Verband Region Rhein-Neckar and the Chambers of Commerce & Industry for Rhine-Neckar, Palatinate and Darmstadt. It is a regional organisation which exists outside the traditional administrative hierarchy and occupies a position between the region’s city, district and state authorities.

Its task is to promote further economic, social and ecological development through close cooperation with regional stakeholders, and to raise its profile. The Cultural Office of the Rhine-Neckar metropolitan region also encourages networking among cultural players in the region via different platforms it coordinates, such as the Denkfest – a regular gathering on different topics and challenges concerning the cultural sector, where artists and institution representatives, researchers and politicians are invited to share and develop their projects and ideas together. Other platforms, like the network of the museums, festivals and castles – coordinated by the Cultural office –, ensure their visibility by publishing a journal covering their activities and cooperation.

https://www.matchbox-rhein-neckar.de/english/
https://en.m-r-n.com/
IX. International cooperation and local networks

- What international examples help you work better inside your local network?
- Who in other countries shares your network’s interests? Who do you wish knew more about your local network?
- What in your practice is interesting to others, internationally?
- Who inspires your work in the local network?
- At what international events could you present the work of your network?
- If you were to organise an event to introduce international experiences to members of your network, what would the topics be?
- Whose voices or situations could your local network represent on the international level?
- When joining projects with international organisations who want to work on your territory, what themes make you an especially important partner?
- What international projects that you joined influenced your work in your local network?
- Whose situations are you expert about on your territory? What concerns can you be a relevant advocate for?
- What concerns do you raise awareness about among people in your territory?
- What local concerns have you managed to raise awareness about amongst international operators?
HOW TO CONNECT
LOCAL NETWORKS & INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Be curious and document international experiences
- Get in contact with professionals from other countries who share the same interests – Invite them to join your initiative
- Let yourself be inspired by their example, but adapt it to your needs
- Think about how your practice can be presented to inspire others, internationally
- Develop new projects with international partners, which can influence the local network

LOCAL NETWORKS
> > > INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- Provide expertise on the territory
- Represent the voice of a certain cultural context in the international dialogue
- Protect the interests of local actors and citizens in the face of globalisation
- Promote ideas, people and works from the territory to the international realm
- Host cultural practitioners, artistic works from other parts, and create new experiences with them for the community
- Amplify the voice of your community and raise their problems and issues to a level where more impact can be made
- Improve financial sustainability
- Contribute to capacity-building of different NGOs and individuals through experience sharing.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
> > > LOCAL NETWORKS

- Provide expertise on topics relevant to the community
- Represent an outside view on the issues of the community
- Promote ideas, people and works from other local networks to the existing territory
- Offer new experiences for the community
- Create an awareness of the relevance of global concerns to the local network
- Sustainability
- Contribute to capacity-building of different NGOs and individuals through experience sharing.
Are local networks worth it?

The big question is whether to come to a network with a very clear objective, or rather with a looser defined benefit in mind. In choosing one perspective over the other, it would be wise to understand that measuring performances assumes that organizations are rational, goal-seeking and future-oriented (Gilhespy, 2001), which often is not in fact the case, especially when dealing with local networks.

In deciding whether it is worth it to be part of a network or to initiate one, it's essential to look at the relations between the actors – their profile, their motives and their common history. These are good indicators of how much they are open and able to work collaboratively, to transform themselves in order to accommodate an extra layer of decision-making when it comes to their work.

Together, these create a frame that can help avoid unproductive partnering efforts.

Rather than doing a formal evaluation of whether networks meet the objectives they set, it can be useful to look at their different types of impact on their members (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, and Tsai, 2004):

- **Imitation.** Network ties are good wires of salient and trusted information, that is likely to affect behaviour, and even mimetic adoption of practices;

- **Innovation.** Organisations that stay in touch gain from knowledge spillovers, especially if the actors do not perceive each other as being in competition;

- **Organisation survival and performance.** Pooling and exchanging resources for shared impact and better individual results is a way to deal with the fragile condition of many cultural organisations.

What are the things members are most delighted to get out of the participation in their local network?

- Finding out about different work practices that they might adopt?
- Getting new information that is important to their work, and being able to discuss it with peers?
- Pooling and exchanging resources that make them more sustainable and impactful?
- Or something else?
A pile of literature on project and organisational evaluation exists. For the cultural world, though, much of it is not relevant. It can make local networks seem inefficient and disorderly and may instruct them to adopt a reference system which is in fact alien to their way of working. Alternative ways of evaluation - methods and tools – are available, though. One of them is to create occasions that encourage ‘personal sense-making and regular attempts to stand back and consider how principles and practice were coming together as projects unfolded’ (Kay, 2000).
XI. How are local networks changing cultural organisations?

For artists and communities, organisations act as a set-up that frames creative processes, is able to respond to the legal and financial constraints of society and to function in a market economy. Cultural managers and producers have the task to create a space of freedom for artistic processes to happen unhindered by administrative formalisation.

Many small organisations do not have the needed resources to attract enough professionals to handle communication, management, financial administration, production and planning. Multitasking is a reality in the world of small cultural centres, as it is in many youth, educational, civic and social organisations.

When division of labour is not entirely possible, the border between an organisation and its environment tends to be rather frail. In such contexts, local networks may actually develop because people find it difficult to specialise. By working as a local network, they can exchange skills and roles and avoid the burn-out and amateurism that emerges from multi-tasking.

Informal local networks are best defined not as a form of cooperation among organisations, but as meta-organisations, covering a diversity of functions and profiles which are in dialogue - a constant process of negotiation and exchange of resources - and which support each other in order to survive.

Such structures are most often built by the people responsible for management-related processes, not by those with the cultural-creative roles in the actors’ organisations and communities. Nevertheless, this split can make little sense in cases of small cultural organizations where artists or cultural educators also need to act as managers, yet the challenge there is even heavier: how to balance the perspective of the manager with that of the creative practitioner? Some advanced and diverse local networks manage to bridge artistic practice with civic, social or educational practices to deliver intersectional initiatives, but most of them just create a multidimensional programme which is a puzzle of their profiles.
Appendices

READING SUGGESTIONS


Barber, B.R., *Serving Democracy by Serving the Arts and the Humanities*. Washington: President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1997


Freeman, Linton, ‘A Set of Measures of Centrality Based on Betweenness’, *Sociometry*, vol. 40, No.1, 1977, pp. 35-41


A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

My personal work with cultural organisations, public and private, as well as with national and local level public authorities, has often put me in the position to reflect on the nature of cultural institutions and the value of networking.

MetruCub, the NGO I co-founded seven years ago, has had a miserable time getting through the situation of having to work only with grant funding, scarce service contracts and few donations. Founded with the mission to make a difference towards a more democratic and proficient cultural management and policy development in terms of interdisciplinary policies and practices integrating culture in education and social work, and a recognition of independent culture as public culture, it proved after a few years very difficult to maintain.

Research and advocacy work helped me understand that what could seem to be an individual flaw is often more a consequence of a structural maladjustment. There are some important needs of the cultural ecosystem that the legal and funding regime is unable to address. Artists and cultural producers have been led to think that public culture can be made to resist the transition from a welfare model of state intervention to a more neoliberal one. But while this is true in respect to some areas, it is false when we refer to most. The vitality of niche artistic forms, neglected audiences and cultural interventions with social and civic goals, cultural participation in remote and underserved areas, puts them among the most vulnerable.

Local networks emerge as a potential solution, by pooling resources and considering oneself as part of a bigger picture. But such common work does not come easy for many. It requires a different approach to cooperation and a set of personal skills that are rarely taught in schools or universities. Local networks can also be a trap. By normalising precarity and extensive dependability, they make people and organisations work harder on sharing, debating and negotiating, while
taking time away from other important work, such as ensuring the quality of cultural interventions.

In the end, local networks are difficult to develop and keep alive, and will not grow in all soils. The most austere cultural fields cannot grow networks. Seeds must be planted and nourished first. My work on this guide aimed to be more of an eye-opener than a tool to preach the mantra of local networks. It is my hope that it will spark more reflection and debate on how we work in culture. Do send me your examples, ideas and suggestions if you want to contribute to this conversation.

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THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We show our appreciation for the time and effort put in developing or supporting local cultural networks, and finding the moments to share their most important findings with us to (in order of appearance in the text): Fivos Sakalis and Erifili Maroniti (Athens Culture Net), Christine O’Toole (Belfast City Council), Katrin Franz (Stadt Chemnitz), Rarita Zbranca (Cluj Cultural Centre), Stephan Hoffmann and Heike Zadow (TanzNetzDresde, Kultopia gemeinnützige GmbH), Cluny Macpherson (Leeds City Council), Yasmin Gebhard (Matchbox, Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar GmbH), Kerste Broberg (Göteborgs Stad), Jules Desgoutte (ARTfactories/Autre(s)pARTs), Katrin Reiter and Andrea Folie (IKULT.network), Jasmina Bilalovik (JADRO Association of the Independent Cultural Scene), Helga Massetani Piemonte (Bitamine Faktoria), Kay Sentance (Rural-Urban self-directed network), Milica Pekic (KOOPERATIVA - regional network of the independent art scene), Milan Vrarac (Kulturanova), Mihaela Michailov and Katia Pascariu (Replika Cultural Association), Vittorio Bianco (Rete delle Case del Quartiere), Vedran Stanić (Rojc Alliance), Edonis Hashani, Gent Thaci, Pajtim Krasniqi and Njomza Dragusha (Termokiss).

We also acknowledge the contribution of EUROCITIES, the network of major European cities. In April 2019 they organised in Chemnitz (Germany) a Culture Forum on the theme of ‘Cities developing and supporting networks of local cultural organisations’. The contribution of the cities’ representatives to the event proved inspiring and led to the inclusion of a special chapter in the guide and the inclusion of most of their stories in the publication.

A special thanks goes to Piet Forger, whose knowledgeable and supportive comments made the guide go in the right direction in its initial steps.

Lucie Perineau, ENCC Communications and Publications manager, proved to be the best colleague one could have when dealing with such a complex topic that needs to be transformed into ideas suited to the form of a guide. Her input went beyond the communication part, and provoked serious reflections and rethinking of the approach.
Local Networks: (a guide to) Reimagining the Work of Cultural Organisations
by Raluca Iacob
March 2021

Coordination & editing: Lucie Perineau & Sara Turra
Proofreading: Ryan Brinkey
Graphic design: Marine Domec & Lucie Perineau
Illustration: Marine Domec (except p.58 Lucie Perineau)

This publication should be mentioned as follows: Local Networks: (a guide to) Reimagining the Work of Cultural Organisations, ENCC, Brussels, March 2021.

This publication is a result of the research project From Hubs to Nodes, carried out in the framework of the ENCC Next Generation project (2018-2021). The documentation for the case studies was carried out in 2019 and reflects the reality of the cultural centres at that time.

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