LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: local networks support the transition towards a new public culture

Raluca Iacob
'We were forced to stop and reevaluate everything. It was as if a mirror was put in front of our face', said Annelies Nagels, Artistic and Business Manager of De Warande, a cultural centre from Turnhout, Belgium. We were speaking during a (of course) Zoom-based interview last month. As most cultural organisations in Europe, De Warande had to stop their operations last year in March and resume a few months later with restrictions up to this day. Their case is by no means singular.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is still here with us, it makes little sense to talk about its 'lessons'. We are not over it, we are still very much in it for a time after which we are sure that the world will not go back to the way it looked and behaved before March 2020. It is for this reason - to drive the transition, not to be a powerless witness to it - that we are now observing and trying to understand how it has affected us, our work, our organisations and the many webs of connections we live in and thrive in.

In March 2021, the ENCC published a guide dedicated to the work and impact of local networks with a socio-cultural core. I had been working on it since 2018, and while the documentation and much of the writing had been finished shortly after March 2020, its editing and final version had to wait. As months passed, I started to question the relevance and the validity of the work, and new topics emerged.

How would local networks act during the pandemic? What roles would they undertake in support of their members? How would they stimulate new ways to engage with audiences? We published the guide as it was, but we promised to come back with some answers.

In February 2021, the ENCC published a report about the way socio-cultural centres fared through the pandemic and the main challenges they were facing. In this article we look at the way local networks have done it. Also, we explore the role they might have in the transition to the new world we have seen dawning during the last year and a half.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected cultural players and people’s experience of culture. In the first two quarters of 2020, the ‘arts, entertainment and recreation’ sector in Europe saw one of the steepest declines in income and hours worked. Less quantifiable was the fact that as encounters with audiences and creative networking opportunities moved to the online space, much of the human touch, the personal serendipity of those encounters was also lost, as well as the feeling of collectively sharing an embodied space.

A report produced by IDEA Consult et al. for the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education, published in February 2021, is a useful witness of the storm we have been through and of the remaining landscape.

The restrictions needed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and their consequences made more visible and heightened the existing inequalities in social protection and economic vulnerability among cultural workers and organisations. They also pointed at the (in)capacities of our administrations and officials to grasp cultural work and understand its roles and dynamics, and they proved that independent and nonstandard workers are underrepresented as actors of social dialogue.

Another side effect was that they upset the status quo. The IDEA Consult et al. report notes that the crisis highlighted non-sustainable practices, but also brought out experiments and new practices that, if developed, have the potential to be scaled up in the context of a broad sustainable transition movement.

The cultural and creative sectors (CCS), with the exception of the IT, were badly fit to navigate such a crisis, most so the performing arts and the freelance and independent workers. Depending on the territory, other
types of cultural practices, like contemporary visual arts and socio-culture, found it difficult to manage the new situation.

Who, among the cultural workers, were the most affected? Those working in the performing arts, the non-standard workers, organisations and people who are project-based and those who rely heavily on ticketing and tourism for their functioning costs.

What vulnerabilities did the pandemic exploit? It is thought that part of the negative impact could not have been avoided, due to the fragmented nature of the value chain in culture, the low enforcement of Internet Protocol (IP)-based revenues and the strong reliance on non-standard and freelance workers, whose social security and fiscal regime are still in many parts of Europe insufficiently adapted to their status and who are often not well organised or recognised as an actor of social dialogue.

The pandemic conditions also highlighted the limits of the project-based thinking and funding system, which sabotages the potential of the independent scene to act as a valuable agent of public culture, especially in those regions or countries where operational funding is not available to it.

As time went on, it was harder even for those virtuous organisations that wanted to compensate their freelance collaborators for the work they were no longer able to perform.

Though at first networks of cultural centres called on their members to support freelancers and artists by paying them for cancelled events, financially it became impossible for centres to do this systematically. ‘There are just too many cancelled events’, says Leen Vanderschueren from cult!, the network for cultural houses in Flanders and Brussels.

How did local networks perform during the COVID-19 crisis? How did they respond to the precarity and the fragility of important parts of the cultural and creative sector? What was their response to the (lack of) adequate measures of support from the State?

2. Access to culture and audience development are two key areas where local networks made a difference, as digital tools and capacities could be shared among actors.

Much of the funding for cultural programming during the (partial) lockdown went to support online, digital initiatives, new productions and adaptations of existing ideas. For the audience, this proved to be an opportunity to maintain a connection, while for the cultural actors it was a bittersweet solution.

Where funding and capacities for digital work existed, together with professional coordination, practice has shown that much can be done as a network for the benefit of the members, and that the crisis can even become an opportunity. 'If you already had a network, it was a booster if you were able to invest in digital infrastructure and had the time to connect and co-create', says Katrin Reiter from Netzwerk Bildungsberatung, Salzburg, Austria.

City-based local networks explored the potential of digital means for cultural production and participation: ‘We organized online acts such as a media campaign called 'Stay Home with the Authors' reports Amarissia Paragioudaki from Athens Culture Net. 'Another successful activity the network managed to develop during the pandemic was a Digital Treasure Hunt, an online game of solving puzzles and virtual browsing of Athens and its culture.'

As part of people’s reliance on online communication, aggregators of digital events and cultural resources became essential, especially where individual cultural actors lacked the needed communication and marketing capabilities to fight for the attention of online audiences. Some such portals and platforms were launched by government administrations, but regional networks were also active in this way for the benefit of their members. Robert Montoto from the Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar GmbH, a regional development consortium, described one: 'Kulturmagazin der Festivals, Museen und Schlösser, a cultural magazine about the network of festivals and the network of
museums and castles in our region, is one of our cooperative projects. It serves as a showcase for the regional scene and provides cultural organizers with much-needed visibility, especially during this crisis. These examples show the importance of the role of intermediaries, such as local networks, for the capacity of cultural players to still be able to reach their audiences.

When it comes to the needed resources for online cultural experiences, the streaming of online events is not a sustainable form of revenue for cultural organisations. It can continue only through additional funding, from public or private sources. In fact, the weakly-protected IP - based revenue models seem to be working only for a very limited fraction of cultural players. Also, the hard infrastructure needed for quality performances and online streaming is costly, and the competences needed to facilitate events and manage online and digital projects are not to be taken for granted.

Where the capacity for digital transformation is missing, public intervention, in the form of reform or investment is often needed. Unfortunately, such skills are rarely highlighted in the emergency and re-launch measures.

According to the IDEA Consult et al. report, ‘Capacity-building needs are not sufficiently covered so far in the COVID-19 emergency and re-launch programmes for the CCS in the European Union’. The potential of local networks to provide peer-to-peer working and learning settings and knowledge exchanges between different actors is recognized. They represent the stage for organisations not only to gain new digital skills, but to 'reorient their business models and critical rethinking processes' with the support of structural public (innovation) support.

3.

Such a transformation needs orientation, and the crisis has also shown the direction in which cultural management needs to go: a transformation of cultural programming as a more collaborative process, involving partners in a less directive way and engaging audiences, but also staff and the extended network of collaborators in new and more profound ways. Not meeting the audiences on the ground during the past year and a half meant that a new connection with them had to be created. Also, being distanced from each other implied that new ways of working were needed for cultural organisations. These dual challenges represented an incentive for new or reinforced local networks. The need to pool resources for new initiatives, as well as the goal of helping audiences still find meaning in their work, were for many like a North Star that aligned their goals and values with those of other actors in the territory.

Annelies Nagels from De Warande cultural centre explained: 'Up until now we have always tried to do everything ourselves, but now we want to see what everyone else is doing. Before, we integrated everything in our organisation, now we want to work together with others. We are rethinking the approach, from 'programme-based' to 'public-based'.

The current landscape of our societies is making a case for the essential role of audiences in meaning-making, for co-dependency among cultural players and for participation as a needed feature of cultural practices within and outside of the organisation.

The preparations that preclude such a transformation include having a particular type of mind-frame, one that is oriented towards people (be they staff, collaborators or audiences) and the value of their participation. In this sense, the crisis has augmented the voice of the powerful needs of the people to be heard, to be connected, to matter. For Michaela Michailov and her colleagues at Replika Centrul de Teatru Educational, a centre for educational theatre in Bucharest, Romania, it meant a renewed sense of the relevance of their cultural and social vision, and a questioning of the potential of a cultural space: 'The need to broaden our activities and become even more inclusive than we are became very urgent for us. Theatre should be a platform for interweaving political emotions, for
encompassing emancipatory subjectivities. Otherwise it becomes useless and self-sufficient. The pandemic meant a break in our struggle to consolidate an audience interested in debating, through performances, urgent social and political problems. The emotional connections with our spectators have been, in a way, interrupted by an affective turn towards the deep questions we addressed to ourselves: is a space linked to its everyday life activities, or can it be vitalized through various types of actions when it is closed?"  

This new possibility of critically observing how things were being done also meant a new understanding of work processes as being less determined by one’s official role in the organisation, and reconnections of people with the core mission of their organisation. Annelies Nagels gives some examples. ‘Even in our organisation, we somehow forgot to involve our own people, and they did not feel connected anymore. In the case of programming, for example, before we would have invited only those with explicit responsibilities, but now we asked the whole staff to participate. This led to creative ideas about the organisation of space. Also, because a lot of people could not do their normal jobs, we asked them what they would like to do instead, what other qualities they had. For example, the person in charge of the restaurant is now in charge of the sustainability programme, we did not know that he had these other skills. People felt more respected.’  

This type of attitude can create new networks inside organisations, and lead to a better awareness of the capacities of the people working within and for the organisation. This attention to the staff is the mirror-like image of the attention to outside connections, possible partners, and new realisations of what work can look like if care for the other and a feeling of mutual trust and reliance is built.  

The potential of networks to induce changes in cultural programming and work processes is one of the key conclusions of this pandemic period. Lapo Bettarini, from La Concertation regional network of cultural centres in Brussels, Belgium, described collaboratively transposing an onsite project for the online medium: ‘The transformation of our project, the Human Library, where contact and exchange through dialogue between two people is fundamental, took place in collaboration with our partners and with other associations from Brussels, but also with international organisations’.

For this to happen, cultural managers and curators face the challenge to turn more towards facilitation, and further away from the expectation to be regarded as authorities in the production of knowledge and the design of production. ‘It is difficult to work like this, because curators had a monopoly on artists, but now people no longer accept this’, says Annelies Nagels. ‘They want to be involved in the decisions. It is another step in the direction of democratisation. This is the reality of today, we are inventing the democracy of culture.’  

A whole separate discussion would be needed around the education of a new generation of cultural professionals who, having developed the specific competences of their specialisation, would also be able to lead within networks, inside and outside the organisation.

4.

During the past year and a half, these profound reflections and innovations have been overshadowed by more practical needs for personal and organisational survival and adjustments to the new situation. What role did local networks perform to support the functioning and the working conditions of cultural players?  

Based on what we know about the way they take shape and act, one could assume that being part of a local network would mean better resilience for its actors, especially in those networks where shared resources were the key goal. Still, according to the type of local network and the conditions of its operations, the functioning of the network itself could also be in peril. The continued existence of a network is not simply a symptom of the importance given to it by its members. Rather, it is a function of the relation between its outcomes and the
resources needed for this functioning. Such resources are: trust, the need to belong to a community of shared beliefs and practices, but also sufficient funding, time and energy to be invested in the functioning of the network.

There are examples of informal local networks brought closer by an awareness of their common challenges and struggles. Replika Centre, for instance, transformed one of its projects to help other independent arts groups that lacked a platform to reach their audience. Says Mihaela Michailov: 'In spring 2021, we dedicated our platform of educational art to various independent cultural associations we collaborated with, in order to create a social and artistic map of needs, expectations, hopes and failures of the independent cultural sector. In times of fragility, creating an affective embroidery keeps us connected.'

The digital as a territory of solidarity is worth exploring, as we become more and more aware of the difficulty to reach large audiences online, and the need to come together in virtual spaces.

Unsurprisingly, the fragmentation of cultural ecosystems and the lack of networked representation of some of their parts proved to be a challenge for the voicing of certain needs for emergency support measures. Networks, even those who are not recognised per se as formal actors of tripartite social dialogue, became their advocates. 'We organised a campaign asking the Ministry of Culture to provide support for artists and cultural workers, we initiated urgent support mechanisms for members of ICSS Association, including small grants for those at risk due to the crisis. [...] We communicated with our partners on the regional level through the Kooperativa platform for culture, and jointly reacted on that level to a variety of misuses of government powers in times of crisis', says Milica Pekic from the Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia and KOOPERATIVA – a regional platform for culture.

Robert Montoto also offers an example: 'Our existing networks of the Rhine-Neckar cultural region have proven to be very helpful during the pandemic. The local cultural actors who are organized in these networks came together for joint actions and addressed politicians and the public with frequent statements.'

Indeed, a better awareness of the need to organise and of the way advocacy and lobbying work in practice when a crisis hits, is one of the powerful conclusions of cultural workers, irrespective of how affluent their society is and how much cultural investment has been historically made.

Milica Pekic noted that: 'Notions of care, unpaid work, precarious and unstable working conditions for many artists and cultural workers, lack of basic security and recognition of labor in the art field, are all questions which are gaining even greater significance and new relevance today'. 'Certainly the budget situation of municipalities will deteriorate dramatically', says Robert Montoto. 'We will have to fight very hard to ensure that those probable cuts in cultural budgets do not damage the cultural infrastructure. We believe that the cultural scene needs to organize itself even more in order to better represent its interests to the public. We will try to create platforms for these interest groups.'

5.
What qualities do certain local contexts have that encourage structured advocacy and cultivate a culture of solidarity with the most fragile players in the sector? How are the responsibilities for such actions shared among cultural players and are they making use of the potential of local networks?

In Local Networks: (a guide to) Reimagining the Work of Cultural Organisations, I wrote about the role of the State in creating nurturing environments for local networks through: the development of funding schemes which are friendly to networks; consultation processes that nurture mutual understanding and exchange among participants, as well as an awareness of their common values and interests; co-founding of new local networks; and the organisation of events and programmes that structure the sector.
In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic has been and continues to be a test for the local, regional and national-level governments across Europe in terms of taking the needed measures to support cultural actors and caring for the vitality of cultural ecosystems. The situation called for firm, urgent and adaptive reactions of support (financial but not only) from government institutions, and local, regional and national levels. The responses varied greatly, and they reflected the real capacities of public administrations to be flexible, capable and understanding of the role of culture in society, and the power of the cultural sectors to organise and advocate for their needs, their rights, and their contribution.

As I described in the previous pages, local networks amplified the voice of culture towards public authorities, and showed solidarity with the most vulnerable cultural players. Now we turn to another dimension of the topic, and I ask: did large public cultural institutions, funded via public subsidies, support the more fragile parts of the cultural ecosystems? And if they did, what use did they make of local networks? Did they form or enrich local networks in order to protect those most fragile parts? Or did they reduce their operations and focus solely on their own mission and work?

Accountability for the situation of the community and the cultural ecosystem should be connected to the resources and the mission of each player. Sometimes, there is an imbalance, and the most precarious part of the cultural ecosystem is left to manage on its own, even if it is a vibrant and important part of public cultural life. ‘Relevant state institutions act without any responsibility for the sector they should serve’, says Milica Pekic. In such cases of perceived lack of solidarity of large public cultural institutions towards the vulnerable independent cultural scene, networks of independent cultural actors acted as drivers of change, as advocates for reform and for a new public management outlook.

On the other hand, we have already heard the story of De Warande, who used the momentum to move from programme-based to public-based programming, which means also an increased reliance and co-dependency on partners and collaborators for their work.

Indeed, in situations where a public cultural player understood its mission as involving also a sense of accountability for the cultural community and the health of the cultural ecosystem, it managed to support some of the most vulnerable actors. For example, young artists, lacking a place to perform. Jasmina Bilalovik, President of MEDIA ARTES, a North Macedonian cultural centre born out of a civic-public partnership (an innovation in governance in Eastern Europe) reports: ‘The most striking thing during the pandemic was that there were a lot of projects by new artists. Normally they come to us looking for a venue and they are loosely curated. We wanted to help them, to help the independent scene. As artists were in general not allowed to perform inside spaces, we came up with solutions, for example online or outside the building, in open air.’

Regional public networks have also actively worked to support artists, the most affected players in the cultural scene. Robert Montoto notes: ‘During the crisis, our cultural office launched and implemented a solidarity assistance program called ‘Support your local artist’, in cooperation with regional initiatives and the company BASF SE. In the future, our work will continue to have a cultural-political dimension. It will be about preserving cultural infrastructure and focusing on those cultural actors who are not represented in our large networks. We will have to try to support regional artists and projects. The creation of a cultural advocacy group and the presentation of the social significance of art and culture are also tasks that must be addressed.’

A discussion about the sharing of essential resources for culture, such as space, has also been restarted. As Robert Montoto underlined, the concept of the so-called ‘third places’ is expected to receive greater attention and contribute more to the design of inner cities.
According to the IDEA Consult et al. report, some of the phenomena observed in work and audience behaviours will continue, increase, and even accelerate: the use of digital technology, cultural participation marked by anxiety and increased health consciousness, social fractures and deteriorated mental health.

To this, society must respond better than it already has, and this will involve a role for local networks as well. Following the conclusions put forward by the already-mentioned report, a transition towards new models of cultural production and audience engagement requires learning and the sharing of examples highlighting cultural organisations’ innovative power to experiment with possible alternatives, often in collaboration with new partners. It would also mean, from the point of view of public authorities, giving a strengthened role to socio-culture, a type of culture with a heightened social sensitivity.

In 2020, the authors observed ‘a lack of prioritisation of policies that promote complementarities between culture, health and well-being and that encourage mutual enrichment between public health and the CCS’, which ‘hampers the full contribution of culture and creativity to social cohesion and individual well-being.’

Indeed, among the new ideas that have finally fully emerged on the public scene is the one that culture is, at its core and in its peripheries, internally and socially connected, and that the ‘creative economies are interconnected systems of cultural resources of many kinds’. To reflect this, policy priorities need to assume a broadening of perspective beyond just digital opportunities, taking into account the ‘(current) major crises affecting the CCS and their role in society at large (in relation to e.g., health, environmental, social cohesion, international solidarity and economy).’

A reinforced link between culture and society via education was also strongly highlighted by the recent Porto Santo Charter: ‘In order to promote cultural citizenship, we must place culture, understood in a plural and participatory manner, at the heart of educational policies, and education at the heart of cultural policies. In order for each one to be able to participate in the culture of all people, in an empowered manner, they must have the conditions to do so. It is decisive to recognise cultural institutions as educational territories — in the same way that schools work as cultural beacons.’

Networks are the best environments to connect and to pool human and physical capacities: to learn, to share ideas, to exchange and engage in dialogue and or/joint action that enables the upscaling of fragmented initiatives, as helpful tools for the much-needed transition. Also, for cultural workers, especially those who rely on temporary arrangements and do not have the benefits of working contracts or fiscal and social security protection in their country, it is only via network-based structures that they can defend their rights and voice their demands and concerns in situations of crisis.

In the case of organisations, they can and are already building up connections and cooperation that go beyond cultural practices. They are embodying another need for the future: to support cooperation models reaching beyond the cultural sector, explicitly inviting cooperative work between activists/NGOs/researchers and cultural initiatives/artists on topics like sustainability, inequalities, diversity and polarization. In doing so, they work to strengthen democratic aspects of culture.

In more than one way, networks, and in particular networks with a socio-cultural core, have a place in the transition towards practices and policies that acknowledge that public culture needs to become a prized factor and contributor to sustainable development.

Among the future challenges lies the awareness of the value of their work, as they are also advocates for a better recognition of socio-culture related practices and institutions.
Networks are efficient in situations of crisis, where a strong collective reaction drives a type of decisive, dynamic campaigning, and specific targeted advocacy effort. Still, they also serve well causes that need longer-term efforts, a constant pace of activities, other methods, and the proposal of a distinct set of values for cultural work.

The German Association of Socioculture, for example, focuses on advocacy and cultural policies for socio-cultural centres, a type of work that needs 'a lot of capacity and workforce, that is hard to afford by individual centres'. Such representative networks have far more chances to develop professional long-term advocacy work, because they pool resources and capacities, and they act as a collective voice, thus making their case stronger to governments and other members of the community.

Milica Pekic talks about advocacy work as a demonstration of an alternative set of values about culture: 'Independent cultural scene was particularly endangered, working in unstable conditions without permanent income or financial support. In this specific situation, the Association of the Independent cultural scene of Serbia (ICSS), came together with other associations and collectives on the scene to demonstrate alternative values. Solidarity, collective action, exchange and joint initiatives were the building elements of all the activities we started or took part in throughout 2020 and in the first half of 2021.'

8.
Empowerment is essential for our capacity to care, and it is one of our present and future missions. To care more, and to care better: for the situation of people who may or may not be our audiences today, for the precarity of cultural workers who might not be ourselves now, for a large proportion of socio-cultural centres and independent arts organisations.

This attitude reflects a more encompassing understanding of how we, in the public cultural sector, are connected, how the vulnerability of some disrupts the balance in the creative ecosystem and affects many more, and how together we can better navigate a crisis and engage our audiences.

A systematic effort to put the awareness of this balance of fragility and potential at the core of our work could mean a better resilience of our cultural worlds and more impact for culture in society. Nothing is more urgent and more transformative than to develop our capacities to care and to enact a culture of solidarity.

In this article, the case has been made that socio-cultural practices and institutions which are well-embedded in local networks are the types of structural realities that have a significant role in the much-needed transition towards a sustainable model for a socially-engaged culture, a culture of care.

This does not require reimagining the work of cultural organisations, dissolving individual organisations and instrumentalising the arts for a social goal, but rather finding a path forward to reinvent public culture in a way that balances the need of independence with the awareness of the essential connection between the arts, people and society. This is the web we should be weaving to support our future together.

Raluca Iacob
August 2021
This article was based on interviews with: Anja Bajda, PhD, Head of Cultural Centre Cerknica (Cerknica, Slovenia); Mihaela Michailov, cultural manager, Replika Centre for Educational Theatre (Bucharest, Romania); Kerste Broberg, Head of Development, City of Goteborg (Goteborg, Sweden); Robert Montoto, Head of Cultural Office, Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar GmbH (Rhein-Neckar, Germany); Jasmina Bilalovic, President of Cultural Centre MEDIA ARTES (Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia); Milica Pekic, co-founder of the Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia and KOOPERATIVA – a regional platform for culture (Belgrade, Serbia); Annelies Nagels, Artistic and Business Manager of De Warande cultural centre in team with Mieke Mermans (Turnhout, Belgium); Katrin Reiter, Project Manager, Netzwerk Bildungsberatung Salzburg (Network for Educational Guidance in Salzburg) (Salzburg, Austria); Lapo Bettarini, Director, La Concertation ASBL - Action Culturelle Bruxelloise (Brussels, Belgium); Amarissia Paragioudaki, Athens Culture Net (Athens, Greece); Bundesverband Soziokultur national network and Leen Vanderschueren, cult!, the network for cultural houses in Flanders and Brussels (quoted in Invisible Damage, European Network of Cultural Centres, 2021, see below).

References:


This article was commissioned by the European Network of Cultural Centres as a follow-up to the *Local networks: (a guide to) reimagining the work of cultural organisations*, also by Raluca Iacob, published in spring 2021.

The European Network of Cultural Centres was founded in 1994 to promote dialogue and cooperation between social-oriented cultural centres in Europe. It gathers local, regional and national networks of cultural centres, as well as individual cultural centres in direct interaction with communities and citizens. It is also open to individual cultural organisations and professionals as associate members. Today, the ENCC represents over 3,500 cultural centres in 27 countries, with quite diverse structures, practices and audiences. The network’s main action lines are capacity building, networking and advocacy. Empowering socio-cultural centres and their communities is its priority.