

Cultural and creative economies in COVID-19

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While COVID-19 has affected every aspect of our lives, cultural and creative sectors have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic. With cultural tourism making up 40 percent of global tourism revenues, the World Trade and Tourism Council has estimated that 75 million jobs in the trade and tourism sector are threatened, equating to a loss of 2.1 trillion GDP in 2020. Some countries have put diverse efforts for recovery but the need to restructure these sectors to meet the challenges of the new post-COVID era has now become more evident and dire.

Prior to the health crisis, cultural and creative economies had been among the fastest-growing sectors in the world. A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade And Development published in January 2019 shows that the global market's value of creative goods rose from \$208 billion in 2002 to \$509 billion in 2015. Culture contributes to direct GDP by creating employment, business opportunities and socioeconomic development. It leads to social prosperity and peace by promoting dialogue between communities, connecting people as well as increasing tolerance and understanding of other cultures and people.

Nevertheless, with the pandemic and its restrictive measures, most of the cultural and creative industries have slowed down or stopped. These include museums, festivals, cinema, libraries, performing arts, music and theaters among others, all venues and events that usually entail public gatherings and thus pose a risk of spreading the virus.

The United Nations for Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization have launched a weekly tracker to give an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the culture sector and collect how countries are responding to the situation. It reported that 95 percent of the 60,000 museums of the world were shut down by March 2020, 13 percent of which may never reopen.

Revenues dropped suddenly, wages were reduced and lay-offs increased, all of which has put the culture and creative sector at risk of withering. In fact, the pandemic has showed how this sector is largely fragile especially as it mostly comprises micro-firms, non-governmental and non profit organizations, free lancers and creative individuals, all of whom function on the verge of financial sustainability. In addition, the public and private support is not always adapted to the sector's self-sustainability and long-term growth. What is needed is a targeted support to rebuild the sector.

Many countries have taken initiatives to support workers and firms affected by COVID-19. Most of them though do not include cultural and creative industries, especially those based on intangible assets and on freelance or other "nonstandard" type of employment.

An example of state support is the French government that has allocated 2 billion euros to creative industries. A "Plan for Culture" was set to protect workers in the field by creating a fund for the self-employed, the unemployed and the small enterprises and compensating for the cancelled films and series. Another state initiative includes the government of United Arab Emirates buying local cultural and art works to display them in its different embassies worldwide.

Many cultural and creative industries as well as individual artists and musicians have switched to online activities to keep their audiences engaged, like performing or reading live books and poetry, teaching online, sharing painting and drawing drafts in action, moving to online purchases of cultural goods and services. Other institutions offered online streaming of old and new performances. The Metropolitan Opera in New York, for instance, has been broadcasting a new opera every night.

By June 2020, many cultural and creative venues across the world had gradually and cautiously reopened, with various techniques taken to reduce the risk of the virus transmission. Reducing the allowed number of visitors, requiring the donning wear of masks, maintaining social distance and checking temperature upon arrival, are but a few of these measures.

While these intensive efforts to offer alternative services, switch to digital platforms and document the creative works and events inspired by the pandemic are very essential for survival, rebuilding the cultural and creative economy requires more sustainable targets. Capacity-building and technical expertise are needed to adapt to the new consumer habits and to digitalization. Countries should also encourage local production and initiatives connecting all audiences with arts and culture while boosting the regional socio-economic development.

Investing on policies linking culture and creative sectors to the health care system is also important to treat and delay illnesses, prevent social isolation and reduce hospitalization and medication rates.

The year 2021 is declared as the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, an opportunity to raise awareness, share skills and best practices, network and support cross-cultural collaboration. It is an occasion to showcase how the cultural and creative sector is not recreational, but rather a vital element for the growth of a nation at all levels. The pandemic and home isolation unveiled this vital role of culture through the evolving desire for people to have access to culture as a source of dialogue, connection and comfort.

In Chinese, the term "crisis" refers to both danger and opportunity. If we were to overcome the crisis we should look for the opportunities and culture should be our tutor.

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