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## **I. Introduction: Exploring the common ground**

Contemporary cities are affected by numerous crises. Increasing social and cultural exclusion, the deprivation of basic rights, and the difficulty public authorities have addressing the structural roots of urban challenges and many other issues demand new policy approaches. They should take advantage of existing ways of thinking in different policy fields and in academic and grassroots communities, and develop more sophisticated paradigms that address the multidimensional nature of contemporary urban life.

The exploration of the nexus between the right to the city, the right to difference and local cultural action, including local cultural policies, provides one such space of opportunity in which potential synergies can be further explored. In particular, an initial analysis of the concepts suggests the following complementarities:

The right to the city involves inhabitants being able to take part in shaping urban spaces in accordance with their values and interests – and this is arguably informed by cultural values. David Harvey asserts that “the right to the city is ... a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire” (Harvey, 2013: 4). Jon Hawkes likewise says that “[our] culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences” (Hawkes, 2006: 240). Cultural action helps build a sense of shared meaning and purpose (Hawkes, 2001: 13).

The right to difference, as proposed by Henri Lefebvre, involves a rejection of trends towards homogenisation and domination embodied by capitalism, as well as the social fragmentation that come with them. It may be related to contemporary approaches to cultural policy which have stressed the need to preserve cultural diversity and to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions in the context of globalisation,<sup>1</sup> as “[cultural] diversity... is one of the essential elements in the transformation of urban and social reality” (UCLG, 2004: para 1).<sup>2</sup>

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1. See, for example: UNESCO, 2005.  
2. See also: UNESCO, 2001.

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Ultimately, the right to the city is “interdependent of all internationally recognized and integrally conceived human rights” (HIC, 2005: article I.2), including, among others, cultural rights such as the right to take part in cultural life (Universal Declaration on Human Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and related elements such as the right to historical and cultural heritage (UCLG-CISDP, 2016). As shall be seen later, operational approaches to cultural rights such as citizens’ involvement in cultural priority-setting, the use of public spaces as environments for the co-creation of narratives and symbols about the cultural dimension of cities, and the decentralisation of cultural facilities and opportunities, may be seen to embody the cultural dimension of the right to the city.

Despite these potential synergies, it could also be argued that, in practice, work around the right to the city and cultural action are only occasionally connected. The language used by activists, practitioners and policymakers in these areas is often different, priorities tend to differ, and the potential complementarities are seldom made explicit. One of the factors that may need to be addressed in this respect involves the clarification of the instances in which cultural action is effectively conducive to the right to the city.

## II. The relationship between culture and the exercise of rights in the city

To reflect on the conditions in which cultural action can contribute to the exercise of the right to the city, a critical approach must be developed to cultural action and cultural policy. It should recognise that policies and programmes in these areas have often deviated from an inclusive, participatory, rights-based approach and have effectively contributed to other urban paradigms instead.

Contemporary developments in cities attest to this. It has been argued that cities, towns, neighbourhoods and local spaces provide the most suitable environment in which to exercise the right to take part in cultural life, and there are several clear examples (Martinell, 2014: 5). However, cities are also central sites of consumption, including of cultural goods and services. Indeed, the contemporary cultural industries have been to a large extent integrated in the global trade of goods and services, just like other basic services (e.g. housing), and may be seen to reinforce its dominant values: “The culture industry testifies less to the centrality of culture than to the expansionist ambitions of the late capitalist system ... Besides, the more influential this culture grows, the more it reinforces a global system whose ends are for the most part inimical to culture in the normative sense of the term ... [Capitalism] has incorporated culture for its own material ends ...” (Eagleton, 2018: 151–152). Many of today’s trends in cultural tourism (major cultural festivals, blockbuster exhibitions, new branches of global museums as tourism attractors, etc.) and the use of cultural images and symbols in city branding for a range of purposes, provide extensive evidence of this.

Alongside the commodification of cultural expressions, which often involves homogenisation, the search for “authentic” and “diverse” spaces and activities, and the symbolic capital derived from them, is often instru-

mentalsed in the name of profit. In many cities, the preservation of historic neighbourhoods, which often played host to artists' studios and other cultural initiatives, has led to the gentrification of urban spaces (Harvey, 2013). The impacts of this are various, including the non-affordability of living and working spaces (and the subsequent eviction of former neighbours and resident artists), the loss of social and cultural diversity, and the concentration of cultural narratives on a limited set of traditional and commercial aspects, ultimately preventing the dynamic evolution of cultural expressions and activities. In these contexts, culture serves to reinforce domination rather than to expand freedoms or to exercise citizens' rights.

These trends also impact on the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals. Certainly, these sectors have already experienced difficulties in the past, yet new forms of exploitation may be visible nowadays, including the increasing prevalence of freelancing in the cultural and creative sectors and the assumption that individual passion for working in the arts and culture serves to justify long working hours, poor working conditions, and low salaries (Zafra, 2017).

### **III. The right to the city, the right to difference and local cultural policies: areas for action**

While acknowledging these tensions and limitations, instances in which cultural policies contribute to expanding individual and collective freedoms and to enabling the exercise of rights, including the right to the city, can also be observed. Very often, these approaches rely on innovation in governance approaches, involving citizens and civil society organisations either as initiators of new approaches or as active partners in the design, implementation and evaluation of cultural policies. And, in a pattern not dissimilar to other areas of activity related to the right to the city, comparable challenges and demands are experienced in cities across the world, thus somehow paving the way for international cooperation.

One relevant initiative emerging in this field is the "Agenda 21 for culture", a charter adopted at an international gathering of local governments and civil society organisations in 2004, at the initiative of the Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion in Porto Alegre (UCLG, 2004). Since then, the Agenda 21 for culture has been promoted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), stressing the need for cultural aspects and policies to be seen as a core component of approaches to local sustainable development.

Although it should be recognised that the usage of the terms "sustainable development" and the related "sustainable cities" should be subject to critical reflection (García Chueca, 2019), promoters of the Agenda 21 for culture understand that a more multidimensional, holistic view of development is necessary, with cultural factors (values, expressions, heritage, diversity, creativity – always fully respecting human rights) recognised as central to development and gaining ground in local governance.

In practice, this involves adopting a visibly distant, if not opposed, stance to the "creative cities" paradigm (see e.g. Florida, 2004), which has generally seen culture as a driver of economic development, and

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has contributed to reinforcing the hierarchies prevalent in mainstream approaches to development and to neglecting the inclusive, rights-based approach to cultural development.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the Culture 21: Actions toolkit adopted by UCLG in 2015, following an extensive consultation process in order to update the tenets of the Agenda 21 for culture and increase their applicability, argues that “[cultural] rights guarantee that everyone can access the resources they need to freely pursue their process of cultural identification throughout their life, as well as to actively participate in, and reshape, existing cultures”, and that “[the] reduction of culture to its economic value may reduce or eliminate its contributions to the common good and, consequently, its transformative potential ... Twenty-first century economic models must allow for a more coherent link between public, private, and non-profit economies, and guarantee dignity and respect for individuals, social justice, and the environment” (UCLG, 2015: 11–12). Although the potential for cultural activities and processes to contribute to economic development is not denied, only limited emphasis is placed here on this nexus, with more attention being paid to inclusive participation in cultural life and the representation of diverse expressions and heritages in the public space.

Drawing on policies and projects inspired by the Agenda 21 for culture and by similar initiatives implemented in other contexts, a set of lines of action are set out below which serve to reconcile and strengthen the connection between the right to the city, the right to difference and local cultural policies.<sup>4</sup>

### **a) Decentralisation, inclusive access and participation in cultural activities**

One of the traditional challenges of strengthening the cultural dimension of urban planning concerns the concentration of opportunities for cultural participation within limited areas and spaces. Indeed, cultural activities have often tended to take place in formal, classic venues (museums, galleries, theatres, concert halls, palaces, etc.), a majority of which have historically been based in city centres, limiting the ability of citizens in peripheral neighbourhoods to access them. A range of complementary factors have also contributed to reducing rates of access to and participation in culture, such as limited diversity in the range of activities available in the main cultural facilities, unease experienced by significant sectors of the population when accessing major cultural venues, partly due to the images and values attached to them (the fear of not understanding, or the perception that cultural activities were meant exclusively for another segment of the population), ticket prices and lack of information.

Several complementary measures and approaches have been implemented by local actors in recent years to address weaknesses in this area, including the following:

**Diversifying the aesthetics, styles and formats** that are legitimate recipients of public support and which deserve a place in the public cultural space, for example, through public programmes supporting street art (Bogotá, Lisbon and others).

3. It should be noted that Richard Florida has in recent years revised some of his earlier approaches in this area to address increasing inequality, segregation and gentrification (Florida, 2017).

4. Several of the projects mentioned in the following sections, though not all, are drawn from the *Obs* database of good practices managed by the UCLG Committee on Culture, available at <http://obs.agenda21culture.net/>.

**Establishing networks of decentralised community cultural centres**, responding to citizens' needs and developing a range of participatory activities (e.g. Belo Horizonte, Lille, Mexico City).

**Providing support to cultural projects initiated by informal collectives and community groups**, contributing to strengthening capacities across the city and to introducing more diversity to the public cultural sphere (e.g. Bogotá, Glasgow, Rio de Janeiro).

**Establishing partnerships with a range of local stakeholders** which enable cultural opportunities to be made available in a diverse set of spaces across the city, beyond the more traditional cultural venues, thus providing entry points to groups of citizens that would rarely be able to take part – e.g. the partnerships between artists and secondary schools promoted by the “Creators in residence” project in Barcelona, which engages students in creative processes.

Beyond the notion of “access to culture”, which may often entail passive reception of cultural works “produced” by artists, the more active notion of “participation” should prevail in these approaches. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that in addition to taking part in specific cultural activities such as, for example, the creation of new narratives and works, the right to take part in cultural life requires active involvement in decision-making and in the management of cultural processes and activities, as discussed further below.

## **b) Recognition and support for plural, diverse cultural ecosystems**

Analyses of the structure and dynamism of contemporary culture highlight its configuration as an “ecosystem” of mutually dependent agents and processes (see Holden, 2015). In response, cities should strive to facilitate an enabling environment for a diverse range of cultural stakeholders and recognise their interdependence. This would show they recognise the right to difference and acknowledge that diversity is not only an intrinsic trait in humanity, but a desirable component of society. Indeed, as with natural ecosystems, a rich cultural life should encompass small grassroots initiatives alongside large cultural venues, classical music ensembles alongside hip-hop bands, commercial and non-profit initiatives, and opportunities and activities covering a diverse set of art forms and cultural expressions. Rather than seeing these initiatives as opposed, they often take complementary and variable positions within a continuum, and may feed into one another: graduates from public theatre schools and members of independent dance companies will often be recruited to take part in TV series and in feature films, for instance. Similar synergies can be found in several other areas.

In policy terms, recognising cultural ecosystems involves catering particularly for the most fragile and emerging elements in the cultural sector, as well as facilitating collaboration among diverse stakeholders, through, among others, the following areas of activity:

**Providing incentives for collaboration between mainstream and “alternative” cultural groups**, and ensuring that the main cultural

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organisations in the city provide participatory cultural activities in all neighbourhoods, as with the Charter on Cultural Cooperation promoted in Lyon.

**Reintegrating the surplus value generated by some cultural activities** into those that are less likely to obtain benefits in the market place, but which are important in cultural terms, e.g. through the public management of heritage sites and cultural centres attracting tourism to Lisbon, the resulting resources feeding into other cultural venues and activities (Richards and Marques, 2018: 92).

**Establishing sectoral strategies** which address creation, production, distribution and access to culture, supported by participatory, plural working groups, as with the work done by Terrassa in the film and audiovisual fields.

### **c) The preservation of public space and working spaces for culture**

The availability of public spaces which enable opportunities for inclusive, participatory and universal access to culture is a core component of the right to take part in cultural life, which can be seen as part of the broader struggle for the preservation of public space in cities and the exercise of the right to the city in the face of privatisation, commercialisation and securitisation, among others. In cultural terms, public space holds the potential to facilitate the presentation of cultural work, the recognition and meeting of diverse identities and forms of expression, and the co-creation of new symbols and expressions, among others. A set of related threats, including a rise in housing prices, also affects the availability of working spaces for artists and cultural groups in many cities, including in neighbourhoods which had been used for cultural purposes in the past and have later been gentrified.

In the face of increasing pressure, in recent years local actors have adopted policies and measures addressing these issues, including the following:

**Promoting public spaces as areas for inclusive, diverse cultural participation**, through the organisation of festivals and other participatory activities, such as the Mosaic Parade in Vaudreuil-Dorion, which brings together a very diverse community following a process of cultural participation, exchange and learning; as well as festivals and events in many other cities.

**Using collective artistic practices to reimagine public space** and generate new narratives on urban life, such as the Šančiai cabbage field project in Kaunas, a grassroots initiative in which artists, urban activists and neighbours work together to reappropriate an urban space and define its purposes collectively.

**Giving visibility in public space to the diverse stories that have contributed to making the city**, such as the “Spirit of Enterprise” project which celebrates the progressive settlement of over 30,000 migrants and refugees in Greater Dandenong (Melbourne), and their stories.

**Designing new mechanisms to foster the availability and affordability of working spaces** for artists and cultural groups, such as the CAP programme for supporting cultural space development in Seattle, the service agency “Creative Spaces” in Vienna, and schemes for the cultural use of vacant spaces in other cities.

#### **d) Innovation in governance frameworks**

The right to the city involves citizens’ ability to see themselves represented in the urban spaces they inhabit. This should be reflected in the ways decisions are adopted, including through the establishment of open, transparent and participatory mechanisms when priorities are set, and ideally the availability of permanent consultation and decision-making spaces representing diverse interests in a balanced way and covering the whole policy cycle (policy design, implementation, evaluation). In the field of cultural policy, as in other policy areas, governance should be participatory, accountable and transparent, and should also involve the diverse range of policy departments that may have an impact on cultural life, as well as the different levels of governance in multi-level frameworks (UCLG, 2015). Ultimately, the aim is for citizens to have ownership of the cultural policies and programmes implemented in their cities.

Among the areas of action which can be adopted at the local level are the following:

**Promoting participatory consultations in priority-setting** (e.g. the participatory budgeting exercises which led to the setting-up of neighbourhood cultural centres in Belo Horizonte) and in the elaboration of cultural strategies and action plans (e.g. Concepción, Nillumbik, Washington DC, Yarra Ranges).

**Establishing networks or platforms of community or civil society groups** engaged in cultural development, representing citizens, artists and cultural professionals, in Busan and Montreal, among others.

**Setting up permanent, “horizontal” frameworks for reflection and policy design on culture** involving public authorities and civil society organisations in a non-hierarchical way, as in the case of the collaboration between the Izmir Mediterranean Academy and the Izmir Culture Platform in Izmir, and the Common Seongbuk Artist Roundtable in Seongbuk (Seoul).

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## **IV. Final observations**

The examples presented illustrate the common ground between initiatives to strengthen the right to the city and the right to difference, and local cultural development promoted by local governments and civil society activists. Indeed, it could be argued that by strengthening participatory and inclusive cultural practices and policies, the right to the city is being reinforced, and that the latter can be embodied in experiences that enable citizens and community groups to reshape the city through cultural practices, creative exercises and the reimagining of city narratives, identities and symbols.

By strengthening participatory and inclusive cultural practices and policies, the right to the city is being reinforced.

Many such examples bring together a range of stakeholders which include advocates and activists promoting the right to the city, but this is certainly not a universal trend – very often initiatives take parallel routes, with limited points of contact. There is further work to be done at both the local and international levels to address the gaps (in the language used, the objectives sought, the working methods, etc.) and to further identify the main priorities for a common agenda between the right to the city, the right to difference, and local cultural action.

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