EUROPEAN AGENDA FOR CULTURE
WORK PLAN FOR CULTURE 2011-2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REPORT ON
POLICIES AND GOOD PRACTICES IN THE PUBLIC ARTS AND IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS TO PROMOTE BETTER ACCESS TO AND WIDER PARTICIPATION IN CULTURE

OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION (OMC)
WORKING GROUP OF EU MEMBER STATES' EXPERTS
ON BETTER ACCESS TO AND WIDER PARTICIPATION IN CULTURE

1 | Introduction

Access to culture remains a highly topical issue across Europe. Available data on cultural participation show that a significant part of the population still does not participate in mainstream cultural activities, with people in more deprived circumstances (in terms of income and education level) participating much less than people with higher education profiles and higher incomes.

Cultural participation is recognised as a human right and an important building block for personal development, creativity and well-being. However, the cultural provision offered by institutions receiving public funding often benefits only a reduced segment of the population. This may require the identification of strategies to increase participation, so as to guarantee equity and efficiency in the use of resources.

2 | Context of the report

This report is the outcome of the work undertaken by the **Working Group on 'Better Access to and Wider Participation in Culture'**, a group of 24 experts representing EU Member States. The Working Group was launched in early 2011 under the **Council Work Plan for Culture 2011-2014**[1], which implements the **European Agenda for Culture**[2].

The group worked together using the **Open Method of Coordination (OMC)**, a voluntary cooperation between EU Member States that aims at improving policy-making by exchanging lessons learnt. The method was extended to the field of culture in 2008, following the adoption of the European Agenda for Culture (2007).

The main issues discussed by the Working Group were illustrated through examples highlighting current practice from the contributing Member States, either in relation to policy measures or to practices by arts and cultural institutions.

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3 | Why is access important? Whose access?

The Working Group highlighted that there may be a wide range of different agendas behind efforts for access, even though policies and practices often converge. For instance, public authorities may be concerned that **public funding is used in a redistributive way**, and that it will reach as wide a segment of the population as possible. Culture is supported as a public service and ensuring access and participation means first of all ensuring the effectiveness of the service, but also tackling inequalities in the distribution of resources. Another set of reasons for which to support access relates to the notion of **culture as an agent for social transformation**: the right to take part in cultural life as a matter of equal opportunities; culture as a facilitator of social inclusion; cultural participation as a way of overcoming social class divisions; and culture as a key competence and a basis for creativity. Regarding cultural institutions, the agenda may also focus on the need to develop new audiences to ensure the sustainability of institutions, in view, for instance, of the current ageing of the audiences of many traditional institutions.

It is of fundamental importance to be clear about the reasons for wanting to increase audiences in order to develop the right strategy. In fact, depending on the agenda, target groups and the measures used to address them may differ.

A strategic approach to access should start with the identification of objectives and should include the analysis of users' habits and of the reasons for not using the cultural offer; delivery should be followed by monitoring and evaluation.

The analysis of audiences allows for the identification of barriers and for estimates to be made regarding the effort/investment that is required to remove them and attract a given group. The analysis typically distinguishes between 'central' audiences, occasional or potential users, and non-users. Even if it may be challenging, analysing the **needs of non-users** may allow for a deep revision of practices, depending on the objective to be achieved. Also, the **patterns of cultural consumption of young people** are in particular worth analysing. Surveys indicate that while young people are highly interested in cultural production (music, cinema, etc.), they are underrepresented within the audience of cultural institutions. Understanding why this is so may be vital for the sustainability of cultural institutions.

4 | How to do it? Removing obstacles to access

The first and most classical approach to increasing access consists of identifying, and removing, the obstacles that may hinder participation. Such obstacles may be **physical, financial, geographical**, but they may also be more intangible, such as barriers in **culture**, in attitudes, and in perceptions. The group examined a range of initiatives tackling such obstacles.

It highlighted how **partnerships are key**. Measures can be **better designed through a participatory approach**, via a consultation of potential audiences. For instance, cooperation with organisations representing people with disabilities is key if accessibility issues are to be responded to effectively.

In relation to **financial barriers**, all experiences pointed to the same conclusions. Removing financial barriers by offering free entrance is effective **only if accompanied by other measures** that address the specific interests or needs of the targeted audience.

5 | How to do it? Building an audience

While removing physical or financial barriers to access is important, it is often not enough to draw new audiences. Evidence shows that the **issue of access and participation seems to be much more on the demand** than on the supply side. Efforts regarding 'audience development' are therefore above all about the **creation of a demand**.

Educational activities, aimed at school-age children and young people or adults, are the most obvious ways of allowing contact with and raising interest in culture. This is why **cultural education should be regarded as one of the core activities of the cultural field**. Cultivating demand means first of all giving people the skills and the knowledge to allow them to appreciate the arts and to develop a desire to come back for more. Thus, cultural education has a great deal to do with sustainability.

It should be noted that education, together with family background, is the most important predictor of cultural participation. However, arts and cultural education has a very limited place in primary and secondary education curricula across Member States, and it is not present in some educational tracks, such as vocational training. Considering the key importance of culture for personal development and creativity, **arts and cultural education should be part of the curricula of all school types, including vocational training**.

Arm's-length services and institutions can play a major role in the creation of a demand for culture. In many regions, local public libraries and community cultural centres are the most intensely used cultural institutions. They are key in continuous education, and may act as intermediaries to help overcome social and cultural barriers linked to the lack of familiarity with 'high arts' institutions. Some such institutions are undergoing deep reflections on their roles and are repositioning themselves as central actors for social inclusion. The full recognition of such a role may need to pass not only via a change in perspective on the part of funding authorities, but also via a revision of job description and training for professionals.

While education is the classic tool used to create a taste for the existing cultural offer, a more radical approach to audience development involves **questioning the relevance of the offer to the envisaged public, taking into account its needs and interests**. In fact, users' surveys show that socio-economic disadvantage is not always the main reason for not visiting cultural institutions. In particular, young people, almost regardless of social background, seem to show disaffection not for culture, but rather for those institutional places where culture is celebrated and conserved. This should lead institutions and funding authorities to a deep reflection. **To drive interest and engagement, it may be necessary to reflect on the relevance** (to individuals and the community) of cultural products. This might involve re-interpreting or re-positioning programming and context (e.g. location) of cultural services. Doing this may also mean revising the overall approach and mandate of the institutions, including decision-making processes and modalities. While this approach is the deepest and most promising in terms of impact, it may also be the most challenging and complex in terms of definition and implementation. The main questions are how to define relevance, who decides what is relevant to whom, and how to identify what is really relevant.

6 | New opportunities in a digital era and direct involvement in the creation of art

The Working Group also looked – briefly – into how new media and online services may boost participation levels and change and increase access to culture. Digital technology allows first of all a **dramatic increase in access to information** and in opportunities for cultural education. Subsequently, it may **facilitate and improve the consumption of culture**. Finally, and perhaps even more importantly, digital technologies and social media may more easily **allow people to be creators of culture**. They also allow better hybridisation of genres and the emergence of a new popular culture. All this may ultimately have a revolutionary impact, **blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers of culture**. It may involve a shift from a model in which the arts and cultural professionals and organisations hold the chain of creation/distribution/critique, to one in which anybody can create, anybody can be an art critic, and the content is controlled by users. This is particularly

challenging for cultural institutions and it is vital for them to understand the changes that are brought about by the digital shift, and see how to position themselves in relation to it.

It should be noted that, in reference to arts and social change, it is often direct participation in making the arts that has the greatest transformative potential and that may lead to life changes. Taking part in and observing and consuming culture are all important, but they are fundamentally different experiences, and they are not necessarily linked – i.e. direct involvement in community arts may or may not encourage individuals to attend more cultural events in institutions. The deliberations of the group focused on the possible role of cultural institutions in **promoting involvement in non professional arts**. It was highlighted that a partnership between professional cultural operators and amateur arts can ensure quality and enhance the value of the experience for all participants. At the same time, it was also underlined that professional artists need specific training and a certain mindset in order to be able to successfully operate with amateur artists, especially in challenging settings; mediation may be necessary.

7 | Some further remarks

The exchanges showed that, while in some countries the issue of how to increase access to and participation in culture has been under discussion for a long time, in others it is relatively new. Developing a **platform for the sharing and exchanging of experiences, both at the European and national level**, is therefore highly beneficial.

It also emerged that, because of their complexity, initiatives aimed at increasing access **may be successful only if they are 'owned' by the institution**, rather than felt as an imposition by the funding authorities. It is therefore fundamental that the objectives are discussed and shared by funding authorities and institutions.

This is also why deep work on access **requires long-term support** – projects need to have longevity if they are to lead to a change of culture within the organisation. Integrating the perspective of access in institutional culture requires a **substantial investment in staff training**. The experience of staff should be treasured and capitalised upon, and networking among cultural institutions may help to enhance and give value to such experience.

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1 Proposed by the European Commission in May 2007 and endorsed by the Council of the European Union in November 2007: http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:287:0001:0004:EN:PDF

2 http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/117795.pdf

To read the full report, please use the following link:
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/policy-documents/omc-working-groups_en.htm

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