Africa’s Cultural and Creative Sector Defines the New Normal

Despite the challenges of Covid19, the continent’s rich and diverse cultural and creative industries have emerged fighting for survival and facing the greatest challenge to re-define itself, as public performances are restricted and entertainment venues and tourist attractions remain closed.

In 2018 United Cities and Local Governments of Africa launched the African Capitals of Culture during its flagship event Africités in Marrakech, Morocco. This cultural celebration, being a first on the continent, will follow a similar model to the well-established European Capitals of Culture, which has been running for over 35 years. The European Capitals of Culture initiative was designed to:

- Highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe
- Celebrate the cultural features Europeans share
- Increase European citizens’ sense of belonging to a common cultural area
- Foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities

The City of Rabat was recently announced as the first African Capital of Culture and will begin its journey by welcoming all African cultures and building a program that aims to consolidate arts and culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. The event, which will be celebrated every three years, will require the strengthening of cultural public policies at a local level and creating an enabling environment for cultural and creative industries to flourish.

Europe Meets Africa

On the 18th June, the African Capitals of Culture held the first of three virtual Intercontinental networking workshops aiming to connect cultural operators from the African and European continents to deliberate and discuss common exchange formats for sustainable intercontinental cooperation.

These virtual meetings will strengthen relations, founded on cooperation between both Europe and Africa, using culture to build bridges and create programs that can bring social impact to local populations, particularly by overcoming reciprocal stereotypes between the two continents. The collaboration will also build lasting tools that include improving access to co-financing, as well as the circulation and visibility of artists’ works and events. This first exchange involves 10 artists from Europe and 10 from Africa with the strategic long-term vision of creating intercontinental cooperation programs that mobilize local authorities, the European Union and the African Union.

Building positive relationships between Europe and Africa will be further strengthened through the collaboration that will take place between the European and African Capitals of Culture. This collaboration will find new ways to open up a positive dialogue and explore our history, as well as celebrate the cultural diversity that now makes up Europe.

Potential areas for collaboration include:

1. Raising and discussing international / common topics, i.e. the difficult past and present including colonialism, slavery, migration, solidarity, human rights
2. Cultural and artistic exchanges e.g. residences, performances, co-productions, exhibitions, participative formats involving citizens
3. Participation in ‘Calls for Projects’
4. Cooperation in cultural and creative industries e.g. networks of Cultural and Creative Industry (CCI) Hubs, and export
5. Policy makers exchange formats e.g. the social impact of culture, and Covid19 measures at a local level.

Covid19 and our new normal

The COVID-19 crisis, has left the cultural and creative industries facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles, none more so than those in African cities that already face greater barriers such as rising urban populations, poverty, poor housing and sanitation, all pointing to a daunting future. Places for social gatherings, theatres, museums, as well as places of entertainment still remain temporarily closed. Artistic performances including live shows have all been cancelled until further notice threatening the livelihoods of local communities and cultural professionals.

However, the Covid19 situation has also given Africa the opportunity to adapt and change mindsets in order to respond to the economic effects of this pandemic. More and more African cities and local governments are recognizing the value of the cultural and creative industries.

Improvements in the enabling environment and the financial ecosystem is a major advocacy point for UCLG Africa and its partners. Africa’s new normal will be digital and must strengthen its infrastructure to succeed, particularly for the continent’s growing young and urban populations. Over the coming months, as Africa’s inaugural city of culture prepares to pull together an innovative program for 2021, this will lead us to three key outcomes:

- Implementation of strategy between ECOC-ACOC
- Set up of assistance for the local communities of ECOC-ACOC
- Development of tools for structuring cultural policies in Africa.

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