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Cultural policies for participation:

An open draft for an open debate

Since 2019, the Adeste+ partnership has organised several meetings between policymakers across Europe, with the aim of identifying suitable recommendations for cultural policies which strengthen cultural participation.

In our meetings and conversations, a number of issues have been recurrent. Among many others, we have selected six we consider both relevant (they seem to apply across different policy levels and contexts) and viable (tangible enough to be practically addressed).

Our guiding question was not “how should policies look in order to foster cultural participation” as this is a question already answered in the frame of several valuable initiatives such as, among others, the Rome Charter, the Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities policy project, or the recent Porto Santo Charter. Our question was, rather, **“what barriers do cultural policies present to the fostering and diversification of citizens’ active participation in cultural life?”** The focus on obstacles is important also in the context of the pandemic, which has brought about a reduction of cultural participation activities (especially those involving children and older people), and increasing risks of cultural exclusion for economically and socially disadvantaged people (including exclusion from access to a rapidly growing, and more and more sophisticated, digital cultural offer).

Indeed, cultural policy literature and cultural practitioners have been describing the changes in approach required genuinely to democratise cultural participation for decades. Numerous examples of policy and practice across Europe suggest possible ways forward. Despite such evidence, however, these approaches remain marginal, a fragmented group of experiments that seem unable to influence the mainstream and therefore to make a wholesale impact.

The final output of these conversations will be a policy recommendations document articulated as a set of:

- 1) Barriers/hindrances, underpinning motivations and related challenges;
- 2) Selected case studies to exemplify how some policy frames and programmes have tried to overcome – more or less successfully – those barriers.

Here below follows a short description of the six barriers we identified to effective cultural policy aimed at expanding citizens’ participation in cultural life.

BARRIER 1. Insufficient awareness of the implications of policy paradigms

Cultural policies rely on implicit paradigms which frame the way we look at the cultural and creative sectors (CCS), dependent on their various and subjective value dimensions, in areas including cultural excellence, economic development, and social cohesion. Such **paradigms not only overlap but are often implicit**. Evidence of impact is often scarce or ignored while the tensions between different paradigms are unacknowledged and therefore rarely openly negotiated.

The tension between the ‘democratisation of culture’ and the ‘cultural democracy’ paradigms is **largely debated in the academic context but essentially ignored at the policy level**, in spite of the most recent initiatives such as the Porto Santo Charter.

As a result, inconsistent expectations of impact and value can (and often do) **coexist in the same policy bodies**. In this blurred territory, many policymakers are not fully aware of or struggle to deal with, such ambiguity. This can lead to programmes and initiatives - as well as strategies at the individual organisational level - which try and fail to achieve too many competing impacts.

In short, the coexistence of inconsistent policy paradigms - not just between different policy bodies but also within the same ones - is barely problematized but we suggest that it is probably one of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of present solutions.

BARRIER 2. Policymakers do not have access to meaningful insights and evaluation

With reference to a number of the other barriers we have outlined, we suggest that the **evidence base available to policymakers is often limited and unsuitable**, leading to arbitrary decision-making and inconsistent expectations. The potential for “valuing what we can measure rather than measuring what we value” is high in a sector, which is relatively **data-poor and traditionally evidence-wary**. While it is standard practice for funders to demand evaluation, this is often done at a purely bureaucratic level, as proof of public monies being utilised by following proper procedures.

Encouraging and **aggregating evaluation research in a way that enables high-quality assessment and decision making** at the policy level (while at the same time encouraging learning and improvement by recipients of public funding) is a key challenge. These challenges increase exponentially when it comes to activities with explicit inclusion and participation aims. Assessing complex social-personal outcomes is challenging, mixed-method use, including quantitative, demographic and population data, alongside self-defined and qualitative insights.

Valuing open-ended, citizen-centred results requires open-ended, citizen-centred evaluation. Despite these challenges, there are a growing number of initiatives across Europe that suggest ways forward.

BARRIER 3. Insufficient cross-policy cooperation

Although the context is of course different, it is notable that policy areas such as **education, health, social and young people's services, are often more committed to citizen participation than culture.** In these policy sectors, which focus on reducing inequalities and safeguarding fundamental human rights, active participation activities is increasingly mainstream, as a means of achieving social development goals.

Indeed **culture is disregarded as a shareholder** in the process, but cultural policies are in many cases not sufficiently collaborative with other policy areas nor systematically cross-cutting to enable a more proactive and focused contribution from the creative and cultural sectors. Overcoming policy silos is increasingly important, but although the UN Agenda 2030 and the EU 20-27 programming are paving the way, it still seems quite difficult to achieve the systematic implementation of this collaborative and cross-cutting approach.

BARRIER 4. Short-termism and the project-based approach

There is strong evidence to suggest that **only long-term commitment to community participation over a period of years delivers on the social, financial and wellbeing benefits** that policymakers and funders seek. Social habits and behaviors are hard to change. Successful processes need **time and continuity** and this is particularly true when it comes to perceptions of culture, generated through the interaction of layered individual and social experiences and narratives. Nevertheless, **policies for participation are mostly framed around short-term and time-bounded project** structures that fail to sustain medium or long-term legacies and impacts. The latter are rarely planned beforehand and hardly financed afterwards, even in long-term and ambitious initiatives such as the European Capital of Culture. Competitive, short-term funding which enables "create-and-leave" projects with short-term ambitions and weak legacy plans (and resources) often actively sustain participation myths and end up **undermining the potential for more serious, longer-term, and more sustainable strategies.**

BARRIER 5. Funding schemes penalize open-ended results.

Cultural policy frames and tools tend to **favour output-oriented initiatives**, while participation-oriented projects entail some degree of uncertainty in terms of their final shape, outcomes, and even measures of success. **A stronger focus on process over output is needed for cultural initiatives aiming at empowering citizens and their capacity** to creatively and critically make sense of their experiences and shape their futures. This kind of process also demands varying degrees of **loss of control by cultural professionals, in order to make room for others' interpretations and actions.**

BARRIER 6. Lack of key competencies, of status and of an innovation mindset

Players in the arts and museum sectors, particularly well-established institutions, do not necessarily have **the competencies required to reach and offer meaningful experiences to a wide diversity of citizens**, particularly the less interested (not only the less privileged). Furthermore, many **lack the capacity to innovate and remain relevant** in a fast and ever-changing society. Stronger and more sustained participatory approaches are more and more in evidence, of course, but these practices remain marginal in the eyes of many mainstream publicly funded institutions - education and outreach, for example, often have a negligible share of a cultural institution's total budget. While **smaller - and independent - organisations are often closer to their communities and better equipped to approach participation** with more radical intent, their practice is still regarded as marginal. Their ability to influence is **compromised by their fragility**, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. Cross-fertilisation is stressed more between the cultural and other sectors than within the same creative and cultural industries, where those competencies could be found.

Policy and support for **reskilling and upskilling of culture professionals tend to be oriented towards hard technical skills** rather than the soft ones that are critical to increasing participation - such as **mediation, co-creation, or inclusive governance**. This problem is compounded by the frequently **low and precarious status** (especially within the larger and more established cultural institutions) **of people working on participation and mediation projects**.