

Strategic Sectors | **Culture & Society**

# Towards a Renewed Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: The Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic constituted a disruptive event that plunged both shores of the Mediterranean into a severe social and economic crisis. The pandemic also put international cultural relations in the region under strain. It is argued here that a more coherent integration of culture into the agenda of sustainable social and economic development should be promoted to enable a renewed partnership and revive the implementation of the EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations in the *Mare Nostrum*.<sup>1</sup>

## The Impact of Covid-19 on Cultural Sectors and Relations in the Mediterranean Region

The health crisis triggered by Covid-19 and the containment measures put in place by public authorities have had negative effects on Mediterranean societies and economies. Governments in the region have seen their capacity to intervene reduced and their economies and societies weakened. Countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean seem to have been particularly affected because of their vulnerable economies and widespread social and economic inequality, particularly among women and young people (see e.g., Noferini, 2020:153; Kamel, 2020:125). Due to its inherently fragile and not very resilient nature, the world of culture and creativity has been among the hardest hit sectors, with obvi-

ous repercussions on the cultural relations and cultural diplomacy of the countries involved.

Firstly, the crisis has had a direct effect on the ability of cultural actors to produce culture and engage in international cooperation, with implications for the entire chain of cultural and creative value. In most Mediterranean countries, culture has been severely affected, with the widespread cancellation of cultural programmes and closure of cultural venues leading to a drastic drop in revenues. The almost total blockage of international mobility and the postponement or severe limitation of transnational cooperation have led to a downsizing of the international ambitions of the cultural and creative sectors. The situation is particularly serious in the southern neighbourhood countries, where cultural professionals were already living in a difficult social and economic context. The enjoyment of culture by citizens on both sides of the Mediterranean has also been affected. While many have found it impossible to devote economic resources to cultural consumption, almost everyone has seen access to culture prevented or extremely limited (Isernia and Lamonica, 2021).

Secondly, the crisis generated by Covid-19 also had repercussions on the institutional capacity of governments to practice international cultural relations in the Mediterranean. For example, data tells us that the cultural representation and cooperation activities of EU Member States in the southern Mediterranean countries were limited during the general lockdown months of 2020 and 2021. A vast majority of EU Member States' cultural institutes have had to close their offices, at least partially; moreover, the economic damage inflicted on some of these organizations – which, as in the case of the British Council,

<sup>1</sup> This short essay was inspired by the author's participation in a knowledge sharing workshop organized by EUNIC Global in April 2021

also link their operations to income from teaching or certification activities – raises fears that there may be medium-term repercussions on the funds available and on the organization of cultural and cooperation activities.<sup>2</sup>

### **Policy Responses to Support the Cultural Sectors and Relations in the Mediterranean Region**

In all Mediterranean countries, public authorities put in place measures to support the creative and cultural sectors during the pandemic. The nature and extent of these measures varies greatly from country to country, although evidence suggests that most of these have been of an economic and direct nature. Alongside public intervention, there has been a proliferation of initiatives by the private and philanthropic sectors and non-governmental organizations, ranging from the establishment of emergency funds to the provision of training and digital infrastructure. Finally, civil society has played an advocacy role in several countries, which has proved crucial in convincing governments to adopt specific measures in favour of culture.

In general, it can be said that most policy measures, whether public, private or non-governmental, have been aimed at ensuring the economic survival of the cultural world and the social survival of its protagonists. The focus of the measures has been largely domestic and there was little effort to restore and support international cultural relations in the Euro-Mediterranean region. A couple of examples come from the most sensitive phase of the 2020 general lockdown. In Morocco, the French institute launched an initiative in favour of the local cultural and creative scene, providing direct financial assistance and technical support to cultural projects targeting social groups with little access to culture. In Tunisia, the Tfanen – Tunisie Créative programme readily joined the government's cultural revitalization fund through the reallocation of European funds. Again, the aim of the intervention was to ensure the economic survival of operators in the sector and to sup-

port the revitalization of Tunisia's creative and cultural economy (Isernia and Lamonica, 2021:37-39). Despite the efforts made by both governmental and non-governmental actors, data suggest that available resources are not sufficient to support the creative and cultural sectors at the domestic level, and certainly not to revitalize international cultural relations in the region. It is therefore necessary to find a new policy framework to build a shared commitment and, consequently, mobilize adequate resources. It is argued here that this is possible through a concerted initiative to integrate the cultural dimension into Mediterranean social and economic development policies.

### **The Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development**

The policy framework of reference can only be the one resulting from the adoption in 2015 of the 2030 Agenda. For some time now, various cultural actors and international organizations have been fighting for the integration of culture into the social, economic and environmental dimensions of the Agenda, which acknowledges that “all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development.”<sup>3</sup>

Culture is relevant to all sustainable development goals (SDG), both in its role as a driver and as an enabler (Vries, 2020). For example, culture can strengthen the resilience of vulnerable communities (SDGs 1,4,5,10,11), empower citizens through education, capacity building and awareness raising (SDGs 1,8,10,11), contribute to sustainable economic growth, job creation and the reduction of inequalities (SDGs 1,5,8,9,12), or simply enhance tangible and intangible cultural heritage and sustainable tourism (British Council, 2020).

#### *Culture and Sustainable Development in EU Policy Making*

The idea that culture is a driver and enabler of development is not alien to European policy making. Since

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the global impact of Covid-19 on EUNIC members, see: [www.eunicglobal.eu/news/impact-of-covid-19](http://www.eunicglobal.eu/news/impact-of-covid-19)

<sup>3</sup> “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. 2015:10. Available at: <http://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Union has progressively taken over and integrated the cultural dimension of sustainable development into its policies. Under the general framework of the New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024<sup>4</sup> and the New Commission 2019-2024 Political priorities,<sup>5</sup> the EU's strategic approach to sustainable development has been complemented by key initiatives addressing the role of culture. These include the New European Agenda for Culture,<sup>6</sup> the amended Council Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022,<sup>7</sup> and the Council Resolution on the cultural dimension of sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

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The New European Agenda for Culture is already articulated in social and economic dimensions that cut across external relations priorities. The agenda is clearly linked to the broadening of the priorities of the Council work plan for culture 2019-2022 – which already gives emphasis to international cultural relations – to include the relationship between culture and development. This amendment was introduced in May 2020 in accordance with the provisions of the Council resolution on the cultural dimension of sustainable development. The resolution recognizes that culture can play an important role in the pursuit of economic, social and environmental sustainability objectives.

Finally, the relationship between culture and economic development is at the heart of the EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations,<sup>9</sup> which recognizes the role of the creative and cultural sectors in stimulating inclusive growth and job creation in Europe and partner countries and identifies culture as a key sector for development cooperation.

### The Role of Sustainable Development in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean

The latest developments concerning the European Union's partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood confirm the key role played by economic and social development in Euro-Mediterranean relations, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. In February 2021, the European Commission issued a joint communication with the aim of proposing a New Agenda for the Mediterranean to renew bilateral and regional cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

The new agenda stems from the awareness that the pandemic has generated a global economic and social crisis, which, to be resolved, requires enhanced cooperation in the Mediterranean, an area characterized by strong interdependence and common vulnerabilities. The novelty of this renewed partnership is the centrality given to sustainable development in the economic, social and environmental fields, and the explicit reference to the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal.

Consequently, the Commission's approach, also confirmed by the Council's latest conclusions,<sup>11</sup> is based on concerted international and transnational actions in strategic areas such as human development – with particular attention to vulnerable groups

<sup>4</sup> Available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> To learn more about the new political priorities, see: [europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/priorities\\_en](http://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/priorities_en)

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/document/new-european-agenda-culture-swd2018-267-final>

<sup>7</sup> Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609\(03\)&rid=8](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609(03)&rid=8)

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13336-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>9</sup> To learn more, see the Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da766854-8907-11e9-9369-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-HTML>

<sup>10</sup> The Joint Communication "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A new Agenda for the Mediterranean" is available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_renewed\\_partnership\\_southern\\_neighbourhood.pdf?utm\\_source=dsms-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=A+new+agenda+for+the+Mediterranean%3a+the+Council+approves+conclusions+on+a+renewed+partnership+with+the+Southern+Neighbourhood](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_renewed_partnership_southern_neighbourhood.pdf?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=A+new+agenda+for+the+Mediterranean%3a+the+Council+approves+conclusions+on+a+renewed+partnership+with+the+Southern+Neighbourhood)

<sup>11</sup> Available at: [www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7931-2021-INIT/en/pdf](http://www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7931-2021-INIT/en/pdf)

including young people and women – socio-economic resilience aimed at strengthening and creating sustainable and inclusive economies, and ecological transition. Such an ambitious agenda will be supported during the next multiannual financial framework period (2021-2027) by the newly established Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

### **Conclusions: Time to Revive the EU's Strategic Approach to International Cultural Relations**

The pandemic has severely affected the social and economic fabric of all Mediterranean countries. Culture has not been spared, both in its domestic and economic dimensions and in its international and relational projections. The integration of culture into the dynamics of social, economic and environmental development could act as a driving force for recovery and innovation in the region. This approach would benefit from the presence of an articulated policy framework that regulates the EU's strategy for sustainable development and places it at the heart of the future Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

However, despite wide convergence, at present there seems to be no explicit coordination between the direction taken by the European Union and its Mediterranean partners towards sustainability and the implementation of the EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations. For example, the new Agenda for the Mediterranean and the inter-institutional negotiations for the implementation of the new NDICI do not refer to the strategic approach, which should be the natural testing ground for strengthening the relationship between culture and development.

The EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations is meant to foster cooperation in support of the common good by building shared consensus in a trust-conducive and mutually beneficial setting based on a "process of consultation and collaboration between EU and third country stakeholders" (Lamonica and Murray, 2021:8). A better integra-

tion of this framework for action with development-related policy and planning would contribute to the renewal of Euro-Mediterranean relations while making culture salient again on the EU's external relations agenda.

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