

UNESCO report: 10 million arts jobs lost in 2020 due to COVID-19

David Walsh
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A report issued earlier this month by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provides a glimpse of some of the consequences for cultural life of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *Re/Shaping Policies for Creativity 2022* report is written in the usual global-bureaucratic language of such agencies. It is full of references to “Building resilient and sustainable cultural and creative sectors” and “Ensuring a diversity of voices,” “Re-imagining mobility” and “Opening up cultural governance,” and so forth.

The report consists of four sections, concerned, respectively, with supporting “sustainable systems of governance for culture”; achieving “a balanced flow of cultural goods and services” and increasing “the mobility of artists and cultural professionals”; integrating “culture in sustainable development frameworks”; and promoting “human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Generally, in each section, “encouraging developments” are detected that “point to slow but positive progress.” On closer examination, however, a “host of barriers” or “challenges” emerge in almost every case that more or less outweigh, if not wipe out entirely, the previously documented “progress.”

The “barriers” and “challenges” arise inexorably, objectively, in fact, from the existence of capitalist private property, in particular the profit interests of giant entertainment and media corporations, and the system of rival nation-states. The UNESCO study takes the existence of the present social order for granted and seeks some dignified means of navigating around the obstacles this places in the path of harmonious, globally coordinated cultural development. But those obstacles, as a careful reading of the report reveals, are insurmountable within the present economic and political set-up.

The foreword, by UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, a French Socialist Party politician and Culture Minister in the right-wing government of Prime Minister Manuel Valls from 2016 to 2017, sets the general tone.

Azoulay acknowledges that the pandemic “has led to an unprecedented crisis in the cultural sector. All over the world, museums, cinemas, theatres and concert halls ... have closed their doors. In 2020, the income drawn by creators fell by more than 10 percent, or more than 1 billion euros. What was already

a precarious situation for many artists has become unsustainable, threatening creative diversity.”

Who was responsible for this “unprecedented,” but entirely preventable crisis? Azoulay, a former official of the French state, does not care to say. She simply moves on to a series of banalities, “We need the vitality of a sector which employs young people and nurtures innovation and sustainable development,” “we also need what culture and creation, in all the diversity of their expressions, can do to provide some personal respite and what they can do to unite our societies and forge the road ahead.”

She speaks of “long-term policies,” but none of the meager measures proposed, even if they were introduced, would repair the damage done, much less solve the problem of art at the mercy of profits and the market.

In any event, the following passages provide some sense of what is actually occurring.

The current “challenges” in the cultural and creative sectors, we are told, “which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, include poverty, gender inequality, climate change and inequalities within and among countries.”

Re/Shaping Policies notes there is “an ongoing downward trend in public investment for culture, which points to new challenges for the cultural and creative sectors, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic and social vulnerability of artists and cultural professionals across the world.”

Moreover, remarkably, the share of Official Development Assistance (i.e., foreign aid) to poorer countries devoted to culture and recreation in 2018 represented only *a third* of the funding that was available before the 2008 global financial crisis. A further decline “is predicted in the coming years due to COVID-19-related recessions.”

In one of the study’s central passages, it reports that COVID-19 has “led to the closure of cultural facilities and the cancellation of events; hampered or halted regular work and collaboration in most cultural and creative occupations; put a stop to international mobility; and compromised the purchasing power of audiences.” According to initial estimates, the study’s authors continue, “the global Gross Value Added in the cultural and creative industries contracted by US\$750 billion in 2020,

and at least 10 million jobs were lost. In the countries for which data are available, the revenue of the cultural and creative industries decreased by between 20 percent and 40 percent in 2020, and cultural and creative industries generally performed worse than their national economies, thereby *sustaining more damage than during any previous crisis.*” [Emphasis added.]

The report observes that the “collapse in employment and income followed a decline in public funding and a rise in the precariousness of cultural workers. These factors have reinforced entrenched patterns of gender and regional inequality. . . . Digitization took a front seat during the pandemic, as it became more central to creation, production, distribution and access to cultural expressions. . . . As a result, online multinationals consolidated their position, and inequalities in Internet access became more significant.”

In regard to the consolidation of the multinationals, the report notes: “Unfortunately, monopolistic and oligopolistic structures in the media remain commonplace.”

The report describes “the threat of oligopoly, which could recreate the gatekeeper function that traditional media companies enjoyed when spectrum capacity limited broadcast output and a handful of TV and radio network controllers effectively decided on content. This time, however, the oligopoly would exist at the global rather than the national level.”

Freedom of information and “diversity in media” are threatened by “increased disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, insufficient media monitoring, ongoing concentration of media ownership and broadcasters’ difficulties in meeting existing quota requirements due to a lack of local content.”

As for artists’ conditions, in a remarkable indictment of governments, arts agencies and philanthropists, the report cites figures indicating that “the largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour.”

Artists and cultural professionals globally face “common conditions and vulnerabilities”: “long or atypical working hours, project-to-project contracts and last-minute confirmations or cancellations, . . . working under physical, emotional and mental pressure and being unable to afford downtime.”

Many artists and professionals work under “informal and undocumented arrangements, which include unfair or inadequate remuneration—and even non-payment—for work delivered, diminished or non-existent pensions at retirement, lack of social safety nets or sick leave and contractual conditions that do not provide stability.”

Freelance workers, the most vulnerable portion of the workforce, make up an estimated 30 to 50 percent of Europe’s creative sector, and that figure rises to between 40 percent and 60 percent in poorer countries. “The predominance of freelancing, as well as irregular contracts, creates a constant

lack of predictability and security. This is compounded by the prevalence of low pay, or even working for no pay.”

The pandemic and accompanying social crisis are not only rendering the artists poorer and more economically insecure, they are also making the political and creative atmosphere more dangerous. *Re/Shaping Policies* points to the work of Freemuse, which produces annual statistics on attacks against artists around the world and across creative sectors.

Freemuse’s records “for the period 2018 to 2020, compared with 2017, show a 20 percent rise in censorship against artists and cultural professionals. The most serious attacks, namely killings, imprisonments, detentions and prosecutions, have all increased in recent years. Other forms of repression make up the bulk of abuses and include instances of physical and online attacks and threats, banning of works and halting of performances, denial of licences and restrictions on freedom of movement.”

The combined economic, political and social consequences of the pandemic, which the UN’s Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennoune, in a February 2021 report, termed “a cataclysm for cultural rights,” are taking a horrifying toll. In addition to the hundreds of leading musicians, actors, writers and others who have died from COVID, the report observes that as the pandemic progresses “the impact on mental health globally is being revealed, with early studies carried out in several countries showing exponential increases in reported cases of depression, which in some cases are up fourfold compared with 2019.”

Re/Shaping Policies points out that the impact of this mental health crisis “on the cultural sector has been particularly acute. According to Muzik-Sen, the Turkish Musicians and Performers Union, over 100 musicians in Turkey are believed to have died by suicide because of being unable to continue to practise [perform].” Similarly, in Australia, the report explains, “there has been an increase of people in the music industry taking their own lives during the pandemic . . . —a sad pattern no doubt echoed in other countries and cultural sectors.”

This is the grim reality, which empty, sugary phrases about “resiliency” and “sustainability” and “new opportunities” cannot conceal.



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