Impact of the Covid-19 Crisis on Culture

The COVID-19 health crisis that emerged in early 2020 has led to global recession, with early estimates forecasting a contraction of up to 1% of the global economy or a loss of up to USD 4 trillion.1 Governments have enacted travel bans and containment measures for public spaces and workplaces in an effort to control the exponential spread of the virus, causing a decline in aggregate demand for non-essential goods and services and supply disruptions.

Travel and mobility restrictions have borne the largest impact on tourism and entertainment industries, which have been immediately affected by the crisis, and the shock is expected to compound the pre-existing vulnerability of the cultural sector as a whole. This is on account of the higher proportion of labour in the cultural sector that is self-employed, contracted on temporary, non-paid, gig arrangements, or engaged in the informal sector.2 As a result, this workforce is less likely to have access to social security or insurance or possess sufficient contingency savings to independently survive shocks to earnings in the face of expected cuts to employment, a fall in demand for cultural products, and higher rates of closure of micro and small enterprises.3

For Yemen, which has suffered recent financial collapse and protracted armed violence since 2014, the health crisis poses the most acute economic risks in the world. Within the context of a devastating conflict that has set back Yemen’s human development by more than 20 years and a low-capacity health sector overwhelmed by war-related famine and disease outbreaks,4 the current COVID-19 crisis threatens

serious damage to the country’s fragile prospects for development and effective humanitarian response.

Due to short-term conflict-related factors as well as long-term causes, Yemen has faced obstacles in government and civil society efforts to promote cultural development in creative industries. Development in these industries are already affected by the mobility constraints of Yemenis based in the country and the international diaspora. Separation in the Yemeni cultural community has impeded professional networking, the personal development of young professionals and the ability of cultural managers to recruit and partner with young Yemeni talent. The COVID-19 crisis will likely isolate and weaken the potential for productive connectivity between Yemeni communities.

The resurgence of threats to basic livelihoods under the recession may also favour the international media’s narrative of Yemen, which views the country as merely a place of violence and famine, against the efforts of young Yemeni artists to represent with sophisticated nuance and empathy the stories of life, displacement and resilience under the war.

The impact of the crisis is expected to contribute to the dearth of income-generating opportunities in cultural production for young artists. Under economic shocks to employment and incomes that create unfavourable conditions for micro-level youth entrepreneurship, young artists are forced to engage in creative work as only volunteerism. International assistance to Yemen should provide support to young creators that will create opportunities for viable, sustainable employment and promote resilience and youth livelihoods in this sector.

RESILIART YEMEN

To respond to the risks posed by the health crisis to the livelihoods of cultural professionals, UNESCO launched the ResiliiArt global campaign and social media movement on 15 April 2020 with a high-level inaugural debate that featured interventions from national policymakers and international artists, as well as UNESCO Director General. The debate called attention to the impact of COVID-19 on the cultural sector and established a platform for artists worldwide to ensure their input on the policy level and within the crisis-response and decision-making of Member States.

UNESCO GCC and Yemen Office plans to organise an online webinar, ResiliiArt Yemen, under the EU-funded Cash for Work Project, to connect the high-level discussion started at UNESCO HQ into concrete channels for dialogue among young Yemeni cultural operators based in Yemen and in the diaspora. The webinar will continue and build upon the project’s regular exchange with the community of young Yemeni creators, which was established by the Yemeni Youth Cultural Diaspora Forum held in Doha on 23 Oct 2019.

Finally, the webinar will also be an opportunity to discuss the EU-funded Cash for Work Project’s response to expand economic and social protection measures for culture professionals in Yemen. This response includes: (i) the support to income-generating
opportunities for cultural associations, (ii) the organization of capacity-building workshops on culture management in times of crisis, and (iii) the production of youth-led awareness-raising online contents on COVID-19.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The webinar will be organised under the EU-funded Cash for Work Project’s objective to promote sustainable creative industries and the resilience of cultural professionals and livelihoods in the culture sector during emergencies in Yemen. The target group will be young Yemeni cultural professionals and trainees reached by previous activities (e.g. the Diaspora Forum and small grants schemes), as well as individuals and organisations to expand the Project’s outreach and local network.

It will provide an open space for young Yemeni creators to share their personal experiences of how they have been affected by the crisis, what the impact is likely to be on the state of creativity in Yemeni arts and culture, challenges in moving forward, and other issues salient to the artistic community.

In holding this discussion, the Project will continue to strengthen the connections within the global Yemeni community and support collective solidarity among groups of young artists who may be impacted in different ways by the crisis. These regular exchanges serve as a channel for creators to identify common challenges, articulate collective professional goals, and facilitate professional networking by enabling like-minded entrepreneurial artists to discuss future possibilities for collaboration and support.

FORMAT

The discussion will be held on 18 May 2020 (3pm-5pm) as an open online Zoom webinar in a semi-structured panel format. The webinar will be held in Arabic and English (including simultaneous interpretation) to provide an inclusive platform for creators from diverse backgrounds and will be announced via online social media (UNESCO’s and EU’s accounts and by the Project’s network of Yemeni creators) in Arabic and English.

The meeting will also benefit from the presence of key counterparts for the development of the Culture Sector in Yemen (European Union, International organizations dealing with Culture, Arab foundations and NGOs).