Cities developing and supporting networks of local cultural organisations – Keynote speech

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Local networks, enablers of public culture

by Raluca Iacob

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I am honoured to speak to you today. Before I start telling you how I see the connection between local networks and public culture, I would like to recall my personal history with the theme as a subjective perspective on the topic.

I started to work in the cultural field 12 years ago, my first job was with a national-level public institution in Romania, and my tasks were to connect the European Union funding opportunities and policy priorities with the reality of the Romanian cultural sector interested to cooperate internationally. More precisely, I was working at the Cultural Contact Point (now the Creative Europe Desk). I was 24 and I was able to see clearly what it means to be part of a European wide-network, to have a space and a frame to share ideas, to coordinate initiatives and to learn from peers. I understood what it means to have a value-based approach on networking.

This was my first experience of a network. Since then, I have worked with formal and informal networks, noticing how the different governance models of networks play out with different types of members and a diversity of goals.

As part of a Coalition of Independent Cultural Sector[1], a network of artistic NGOs in Romania, we pushed for good governance, transparent and competent allocation of public funding for culture. As initiator of the *Culture in Education* network[2], I saw how the engagement of members depends on the resources they have available, their work-conditions and the benefits they derive from being part of that structure.

I saw the Coalition of the Independent Cultural Sector die slowly, because its members reached an engagement fatigue, because the advocacy work proved ineffective, and because there were no financial resources to be pooled for the type of work we knew was needed. But more importantly, I saw how the distance between us, the physical distance and the distance between our ways of thinking made us lose, at some point, the feeling of being together, of sharing the network identity.

On the other hand, I saw how, even without financial resources and our active role, the *Culture in Education* network still manages to survive, in an informal way, among those members that live and work in proximity of one-other, that have discovered they have similar interests and that recreate the network in their own projects and activities whenever they have the chance. From these personal experiences I understood that cognitive and territorial proximity are key factors for the working of a network[3].

Working with and for the Romanian public administration (in 2012-2013 as member of several working groups for the preparation of the next frame of structural funds, in 2014 with the city of Timisoara, as co-coordinator for the elaboration of their cultural strategy, and in 2016, as counsellor to the Minister of Culture in charge of coordination a Platform of Living Culture), I became aware how the ambition of participation sometimes places a burden on cultural actors – in terms of time, energy and even proficiency in taking part in consultations. How when a certain form of activity in which there are no strong professional association (for example, non-profit arts education or small cultural centres), requires an intensive work from the part of the organization engaged in the consultation process. Staying in a local network that engages cultural actors and others with the view to support governance of a territory usually means no financial compensation for members, because it is being done in the name of participation and representation.

Being an advocate for participative policy-making myself, and seeing the process from both ends (that of the public administration, and that of the cultural organization), made me see the need to talk more about the ethics of participation in policy-making: how can we work towards the ideal of engagement of cultural actors and other stakeholders, while keeping in mind the difference in power and resources that exists between the public administration and the local organizations? How much can we ask from cultural actors and what must civil servants, policy makers provide in order to make the engagement work? What tools and approaches are needed to make sure that cultural and creative actors are listened to and involved in governance processes, while taking care that this process does not become a burden for them? To sum up, I believe the question is: how can structural, long-term participative processes at local level be fair and inclusive?

I believe that part of the answer to this question lies in the way we understand and we work with local networks.

The first and most common way to understand networks is simply that of connection - the way we refer to people that stay in touch, that help each other when needed, that find time to catch up on what they and their organizations have been doing. This is the

common talk around networks, usually the one to which we refer to when we say that we are *networking*. It provides for weak ties among people and organisations, which can be extremely valuable in certain situations, but they are also superficial and need an extra incentive to become activated, usually a common occasional interest of one of the connected actors. We can resume this by saying that networks are first of all our AVAILABLE CONNECTIONS.

The second way of understanding networks speaks about the web of connections between an organization and its stakeholders. The development and governance of this type of network rests on the capacity of the organization to identity and manage the relations with its stakeholders (including its peers) with the ultimate goal to achieve its objectives better, have more impact, and be more efficient. This way of understanding a network places one organization in the centre of map, and discusses its relation with other actors, depending on the power, the legitimacy and the urgency of the claims they make on the activities of the organization. We usually refer to this type of local network as my network/ my organisation's network and its management is an important part of the work of any organisation, public or private. There is a lot of literature[4] coming from the business sector about the specific way of handling this type of local networks. Cultural organisations and institutions benefit from this thinking to some extent as well, because it helps them figure out their strategy and manage crisis with the different actors that have a stake in their work. We can resume this idea by saying that networks are a WEB OF STAKEHOLDERS.

Finally, the third type of network refers to network as cooperation, and local networks as "a set of cooperative relations connecting autonomous entities active on the same territory"[5]. This is no longer about placing one organisation in the middle and drawing its stakeholders, nor is it about the connections one makes during professional encounters. This is an intentional process, in which actors align around a common way of thinking or a common concrete objective, and manage to accomplish together much more than they would have managed to do on their own. Though this is the way that works most naturally in the arts world, and it is the type of network that has been developing for more than 40 years now at European level (international networks and platforms), when it comes to the local level, we have not yet exploited its full potential.

Why? I believe this happens because we are treating local networks as stakeholder management, not realising that the stakeholder discourse puts ONE organisation in the centre, while collaborative local networks are about EVERYONE INVOLVED working together. But where could we get the inspiration from, in order to understand how local networks of this type work? I believe we don't need to look far away, we just have to look where we did not pay a lot of attention before: artistic collectives, informal artistic groups and movements, networks of small cultural centres, and creative independent spaces.

For many years these types of initiatives were seen only as a creative force, from which sometimes cultural projects, organisations and institutions emerged, and only recently their way of working surfaced in certain circles of reflection. But still, their working practices are not usually reflected in the way cultural management is taught, mostly because they are often messy, and their anarchic way of coming together and evolving[6] is not easily compatible to the clean and tidy way Public Management intends to work, and as a consequence, how the requirements of public funding for grants or subsidies in the cultural sector portray the ideal beneficiary. Not surprisingly, not much literature exists making a link between the governance of these types of cultural initiatives, and the way civil servants and policy makers can nurture local networks.

But I believe we should pay more attention to them, if not for other reasons than that they are the perfect example of individual actors that rely on each-other to their core for the work, both artistic and managerial.

Local networks of this sort only work if a couple of things are achieved:

- In terms of governance: a flatter, more horizontal way of working (less fixed hierarchy); occasions to meet often; procedures that support the free exchange of information among members.
- In terms of members' profile, the most important trait seems to be the perception of a similarity of status and power.
- In terms of inter-organisational relations, some things seem to matter most: the first one is trust, something that is created through positive previous experiences, but also through showing signs of thinking along the same lines. The academic literature calls this cognitive proximity, which means a similarity in the way we look at the world and we understand where we are coming from. The second aspect to consider is territorial proximity, the physical distance between actors, the sharing of a territory, with everything this implies: a context, a community, a set of socio-economic and political profile.

For the final part of my intervention I would like to talk about public culture and its connection to local networks. Public culture is, as Dragan Klaic was saying in an article published in 2010 on the theme of how culture shapes the contemporary city, a "distinctive segment of the expressive culture and as a critical culture in itself". It is the way we need to talk when we refer to "the intrinsic value of culture, which demands public investment because of it"[7].

If we now go back to the idea that local networks work if they manage to gather members that are in a cognitive proximity to one another, it would imply that local networks in which local administrations decide to become involved in must be shaped around the same values that stand at the core of public service in culture. This would mean that the value system of such local networks must necessarily be that of public culture, and this would mean that it should speak about the core ideals of access and participation, of freedom of expression and critical stands.

Public culture refers to experimentation, new ways of looking at the world, and the aspiration of cultural literacy in the same way that public education discusses citizenship and literacy for a fast-changing world.

Also, for the emergence of local networks that engage the public administration, this concept offers a value statement that can also function as a criteria for similarity among members. As providers of public culture, we can come together in a local network as policy makers, public institutions, private organisations and independent cultural players.

In terms of tools that can help grow such local networks, I believe that local policy-makers need to provide or nurture those type of resources that can be shared and which do not transform local networks into something they are not. Some examples could include:

1) the formulation of regulations that provide not only private-public partnerships, but also civic-public partnerships with alliances of cultural players;
2) funding criteria for grants and subsidies that recognize the value of engaging in local networks;

3) concession of spaces that can be shared by local networks of cultural players;
4) bridge-events;
5) funding provided for informal artistic groups;
6) funding for intermediaries that can nurture themselves the growth of local networks.

The European Network of Cultural Centres[8] (ENCC), the organization for which I am currently working on a toolkit for the formation and governance of local networks, is, for example, such an intermediary, connecting at European level a variety of cultural actors and territories that are underrepresented within disciplinary/specific cultural and artistic spaces. The ENCC is putting them in interdisciplinary situations that make the link between culture and social and democratic innovation, in Europe and is giving them the resources to develop new collaboration models for their projects, helping them to strengthen, empower and professionalize individual professional paths. Such work is deeply needed not only at European level, but also at national, regional and local level.

Last but not least, one strong argument for local networks in culture is that they can bring in people that tend to disengage with the traditional cultural offer. Young people tend to disengage from the discourse of public institutions and the initiatives of public administration even when their goals reflect their values, just because the design of projects and initiatives they are invited to take part in keeps them at a distance.

By encouraging local networks that are shaped and governed not as stakeholder management of local authorities, but as free and critical organizational creatures that come together because of common concerns, with a desire to work together, you can help shape a space for engagement and participation. This type of local networks are the best cradle for public culture because they embody not only the goal, but also the design of public culture: free, experimental, bold, based on trust and reciprocity.

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[1] https://coalitiasectoruluiculturalindependent.wordpress.com/ [accessed on April 7, 2019]
[2] http://culturaineducatie.ro/ [accessed on April 7, 2019]
[3] For a detailed discussion about factors that make networks work, see Brass, Daniel J.; Galaskiewicz, Joseph; Greve, Henrich R.; Tsai, Wenpin, "Taking Stock of Networks and Organizations: A Multilevel Perspective", *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 47, No., Academy of Management, 2004, pp. 795-817
[4] See, for example: Mitchell, R.K., B.R. Agle and D.J. Wood., "Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of Who or What Really Counts", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1997, pp. 853-886
[5] Powell, W., and L. Smith-Doerr. "Networks and economic life". *Handbook of economic sociology*, ed. N. Smelser and R. Swedburg, 1994, Princeton University Press, pp: 368–402
[6] For a discussion about social anarchy as explanatory framework for the formation and work of arts networks, see Wachhaus, T. Aaron, "Anarchy as a Model for Network Governance", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1, Wiley on behalf of the American Society for Public Administration, 2012, pp. 33-42
[7] See https://www.eurozine.com/culture-shapes-the-contemporary-city/ for full article published on *Eurozine* [accessed on April 7, 2019]
[8] https://encc.eu/ [accessed on April 7, 2019]