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The impact of COVID-19 on the cultural sector in Malta

1. Introduction: taking stock towards the end of an *annus horribilis*

At the time of writing this brief text, in autumn 2020, while feeling relieved by the cooling Mediterranean weather ushered in by northerly breezes and sea temperatures that dipped slightly, I felt the need to take stock again of how the politically-motivated and economically-driven management of COVID-19 in Malta, my home country, has impacted the cultural scene. It is worth noting that by October, while updating and editing this text, the oncoming of winter seemed to be accompanied by a harshening of social conditions related to the pandemic, and still not enough being done to mitigate or reverse some of the impact on the cultural sector.

In a way that evoked the experience of many other countries, including small ones and island states like Malta, that had managed the sudden onset of the pandemic in March and April of this year fairly well, the reopening of many European airports in mid-July and a widespread dropping of people's guard, led and encouraged by political nonchalance and opportunism, significantly contributed to a sharp rise in cases of contagion and ensuing fear, worry and various instances of disruption to everyday life; these ranged from more rigorous social distancing to the quarantine of family members, friends or even oneself.¹

Therefore, I wondered how the cultural sector had fared, and what reflections could be drawn from an assessment of how things stood.

Since my educational and practical formation has gravitated towards cultural policy for much of my adult life, my main interest in carrying out this assessment is from a governance and policy perspective. This is true of most pieces of research, writing and also activities I tend to pursue and learning more about this area stimulates my continued interest in cultural aspects of human activity.

It has been widely argued that life before the global spread of COVID-19 has changed dramatically. Some have gone as far as to claim that certain changes would not be reversible; such a judgment, when made, has been made on an observation of the ways in which different societies have reacted and learned to manage the many virus-induced challenges. Through this text I will briefly assess this observation in general terms, before focusing on those areas of human activity related to the arts and culture.

This text will acknowledge the international scope of the pandemic. However, for the purpose of clarity and brevity, it will focus on European and Mediterranean contexts, with particular attention paid to the island state of Malta that lies at the heart of this space. In ways that are similar to other peripheral yet also central territories that are caught on the edges of continents while lying at the crossroads of various kinds of traffic, both licit and

¹ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/inconsistent-messages-gave-false-impression-covid-19-was-over.818659>;
https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fworld%2feurope%2fmalta-once-nearly-virus-free-sees-covid-19-resurgence%2f2020%2f08%2f21%2fe69fa2ba-e3d8-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html

illicit, Malta is characterised by the kind of rapid social changes characteristic of lands traversed by mobile people and goods, as well as the development and delivery of services related to financial gain and economic development.²

2. Metaphors to help with understanding our contexts

A good friend of mine, poet and professor of Maltese literature Adrian Grima, often told me how metaphors may be ideal in helping us understand situations around us.³

As the first image with which I will try to understand the current circumstance, the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor of life in the twenty-first century as one of being immersed in 'liquid modernity' has been commented on, among others, by the Italian sociologist Carlo Bordoni. On the one hand, he seems to strike a chord with the ongoing uneasy climate when he notes that 'the current condition of our world' is one 'in which insecurity, uncertainty, and individualism are the dominant players'.⁴

However, one of the strengths of Bauman's image is, quite aptly, its flexibility and malleability with which to effectively address different situations. So, on the other hand, one may refer to quite a different interpretation of this idea when considering Roman Batko's analysis of a liquid organisation in order to reflect on the engaging dynamic structure of contemporary society that encourages interaction, as well as the values that creative collaboration brings to daily practices in the arts and culture.⁵ Bauman's compatriot, a professor of management who studied Polish literature, thus opens up positive possibilities for greater social wellbeing, in spite of the many challenges our communities come across. In current contexts, one may refer to distancing and possibly a growing wariness to engage with other people in, say, closed environments. However, other challenges may be more traditional, and powerful, because already well established in our perception of others and how and why we related to one another.

The pervasive nature of neoliberal capitalism has arguably manifested itself further in society's response to the difficulties posed by coronavirus in the way we deal with other people, groups as well as institutions, including theatres, gallery spaces, universities and public and/or private activities aimed at significant numbers of people, such as festivals, natural parks, heritage trails and amusement parks. It seems there exists a general mistrust of those actions for which motivations may not be clear and that may appear as threatening. The fear of the pandemic may have led many to expect more rigid levels of codification in relation to our behaviour towards each other. And arguably, the monetary value we assign to actions may appear to be the safest code, because based on a transactional and profitable nature.

² A brief yet deeper reflection on this liminal yet focal context is found here:

https://insea.org/docs/inseapublications/Malta.Seminar2019/Xuereb_DOI10.24981M2019.8.pdf

³ <https://adriangrima.org/about/english/>

⁴ <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-de-philosophie-2016-3-page-281.htm#>

⁵ https://books.google.com.mt/books?id=NbcTAAQBAJ&pg=PA104&lpg=PA104&dq=bauman+liquid+forward&source=bl&ots=q4sb18IDQK&sig=ACfU3U2zw8lp0w9K_ALqLx6auf56hbz_9A&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwipgtis3t3pAhXly6YKHXLCEsQ6AEwDXoECBAQAQ#v=onepage&q=bauman%20liquid%20forward&f=false. In practical terms, like many of my peers, I have been fortunate to be part of a few such collectives. One global example is an informal network of young adults addressing UNESCO-inspired cultural diversity actions through networking projects <http://u40net.org/who-we-are/about-us/>; one Maltese one is founded by a group of female artist activists operating under the name Lab for Creative Disruption.

In such contexts a second suggestive metaphor is one that finds its origin in Classical times, namely the often quoted trope of the Trojan horse. Introduced into a system that encourages the belief that one should not look a gift horse in the mouth, mechanisms proposed and implemented in order to support cultural expression seem to have, on the one hand, further weakened any inherent and non-economic value of culture while, on the other, increased the dependence of this area of human life on its commodification. Admittedly, even this paper struggles to strike a balance between an appraisal of the value of culture for its own sake and its economic dimension.

The third and final powerful image is neither ancient nor new, but evergreen in its source of impact and appeal. In *The Art of the Novel*, the Czech (later naturalised French) author Milan Kundera writes the following:

‘...if European culture seems under threat today, if the threat from within and without hangs over what is most precious about it - its respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his right to an inviolable private life - then, I believe, that precious essence of the European spirit is being held safe as in a treasure chest inside the history of the novel, the wisdom of the novel.’

This reflection was published in 1986, hence at what, with hindsight, would be described as the crepuscular years of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Almost twenty-five years later European society is very different in a number of ways. This is also true of the threats it may be facing. It is not a case of *realpolitik* censorship and ideologically-driven expression, or at least this is true of most, though not all, countries belonging to the European Union. But, more generally speaking, in the light of much-criticised, yet iconic, pieces of writing by US political observers Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s, for instance, one would later argue that the battle of ideas seems to have lost relevance, and the practice of the belief in *laissez-faire* free markets, as had already been strongly promoted by British economists from the eighteenth century onwards, had won the day.

As hinted at earlier, the dominance of markets seems to have eviscerated people working in the creative sector, their organisations responsible for culture and educational institutions from ideas that may question, or actually counter, the predominance of economic principles like accountability, efficiency, deliverables and sales on the basis of solid market research and sound balance sheets at the exclusive expense of artistic sensitivity, empathy, intercultural skills like dialogue and comprehension of difference and diversity, and a healthy, life-long curiosity in adopting innovative approaches to social bonds that may include risk, failure and spontaneity.⁶

This context, observed throughout the world, including former or nominally communist countries, especially the new and current world superpower, China, applies also to Europe and the tiny island state of Malta. This text will ask whether the commercially-tuned environment that shaped human interaction before COVID-19, and some would argue that led to the pandemic (through open national borders yet secretive and competitive research and security agendas, for instance) has actually gifted people with enough knowledge,

⁶ A longer discussion on the struggles of the cultural sector in Europe in the context of capitalism may be found here: <https://theartsjournal.net/2020/03/03/xuereb-2/>

understanding and empathy with which to face up to current and future challenges. It will pose this complex question in relation to the field of culture, for reasons both of personal interest by the author as well as relevance to the area being discussed here. Providing answers to this question is another matter altogether, and much more difficult, if not elusive. However, attempts at providing some reflections that, in turn may hint at some answers, will be pursued.

3. Transitioning from pre-COVID-19 challenges to current and foreseeable ones

Therefore, this text would like to continue this reflection on society, culture and COVID-19 by asking the following questions, and addressing them with reference to specific examples:

Was (Maltese) society in a good situation before COVID-19?

Were the arts in a good situation?

What was the impact of the arts on society pre-COVID-19?

Observing information, data and commentary as well as analysis into various aspects of life around the world, Europe and in more detail Malta, it may be stated that most people were experiencing a tough social climate even before COVID-19. This is a statement that should not raise too many eyebrows in surprise. However, it is worth making. This is because in the light of the current situation, one may be forgiven to bemoan the 'good old days' preceding the pandemic, as if the situation was all but perfect then.

Colleagues active in research and practice throughout the world, such as those who, like me, have been and occasionally or regularly are involved in local actions that are however linked to international or regional collaboration many times as part of programmes supported by institutions like UNESCO, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the various EU-supported cultural agencies or organisations, the Council of Europe, or university consortia, for instance, have been commenting in written or spoken forms and in various fora like seminars, workshops and conferences on the importance of adopting sensible approaches to support cultural practitioners. This need has been sharpened by the pandemic's effect on the work carried out by creative professionals and their communities, but pre-existed the current situation.

3.1 On a global scale

The United Councils and Local Government (UCLG) has stepped up its global reach through local action over the past fifteen years since working closely with various diverse territories all around the world. It acknowledges how its members and partners have realised how the ongoing crisis, one that overlaps pre-existing economic and social hardships with the difficulties brought along by COVID-19, relates to the many challenges to existing models of development. The current circumstance and ongoing research seem to act as a prism or magnifying glass that focuses 'on the many shortcomings we were already aware of (...).'⁷ It is important to adopt research that encourages and allows for a holistic approach, as opposed to one that overly favours a sector-specific approach that may end up arguing for the prioritising of one area, for instance the arts, over others. As will be further argued below,

⁷ https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/decalogue_for_the_post_covid-19_era.pdf P2

such an approach has been shown to be short-sighted and counter-productive to efforts within specific sectors themselves, since navel-gazing and self-centred recommendations hinder comprehensive approaches for the wider benefit of society wherein culture and the arts play a crucial role because it is not a privileged or isolated one.

Therefore, an awareness and sensitivity is called for, 'such as the need to preserve public service provision and, particularly, the health care for citizens, the need to reduce the digital divide particularly for child education and to facilitate teleworking, the urgency to ensure adequate housing and basic services for the more vulnerable population and to secure livelihoods.'⁸

Collective learning is identified as a key element of the way communities facing up to various social and economic challenges within their localities have come together to understand evolving situations and adapt and respond effectively on the basis of solidarity. One clear framework for the process of transitioning forward may be provided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These in turn have informed the Local 2030 principles that act as a guiding light for the implementation of actions towards the achievement of sustainable living through the process of localising the SDGs.

Territorially comprehensive and sensitive strategies and plans are there to turn the political agenda into development objectives and tangible results that may have real impact on communities. If handled effectively, the translation of the guidelines to an overall framework for development that consists of the efficient use of resources, services, corresponding financial instruments and other community-oriented efforts may enable the coordination of work of local and other spheres of government.⁹

It may be opportune to include observations from an area of the world that has been severely affected by COVID-19, namely the Eastern Caribbean, because of the exposure of the small countries in this region to economies that rely on travel and tourism services. A recent report explains how 'the fortunes of large portions of the creative industries are closely linked to the broader performance of the tourism and hospitality sectors' and that in spite of clear impacts identified through research in this field, little direct and concrete action has been taken since a significant degree of practice remains 'largely informal' and therefore risks remaining overlooked in social support packages being designed. Unfortunately, this state of affairs is not restricted to this part of the world.¹⁰

In terms of actions that have been recommended to stakeholders in order to proactively address the situation, the report calls on collectives and professional associations, such as cooperatives that are often favoured as a means of aggregation, to be set up in order to support the needs of the sector by effectively articulating to policymakers what needs to be done. Creative entrepreneurs are also encouraged to contribute to providing their own 'branding support and public awareness' aimed at boosting demand for locally and regionally developed products and services. Last, but not least, it is recommended to 'tap into revenue

⁸ https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/decatalogue_for_the_post_covid-19_era.pdf P2

⁹ https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/decatalogue_for_the_post_covid-19_era.pdf P3

¹⁰ [https://www.islandinnovation.co/report-covid-19-and-beyond-impact-assessments-and-responses/;](https://www.islandinnovation.co/report-covid-19-and-beyond-impact-assessments-and-responses/)
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W7QTdbTTzNB-4CtOZeYmHYB2CoEy3-rS/view> P72

opportunities presented by popular digital streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, and YouTube.¹¹

Similar observations are issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with regard to the impact of current challenges to the creative industries and responses both taken and envisaged by the organisation's members.¹²

The report referred to here highlights the connection between the sector and other areas of the economy that is many times overlooked due to traditional modes of perception, research and policy-making that exaggerate the sectoral approach:

'Cultural "ecosystems" bring together different elements of cultural and creative industries and other sectors to mutually reinforce their performance. The division of arts and culture into neatly separated sectors – such as commercial, third-sector, amateur and subsidised – misses the relationship between them, and the ways in which the commercial sector is connected to the rest in an ecological system. The ecosystem approach connects with work on clusters and agglomerations and underlines business-to-business linkages between the commercial parts of the creative sectors and other businesses that can drive innovation locally. An example is the "fused" digital, tech and creative firms which combine creative art and design skills with technology expertise and are often linked to increased growth.'¹³

3.2 In the Mediterranean

In a Mediterranean and non-European context one may refer to efforts in Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine and Turkey, for instance, at addressing what many times are creative milieus that urgently need coherent policies and an adequate supporting infrastructure in the midst of political and economic contexts that are challenging. These are themes that keep recurring in different global contexts.

It is often cultural collectives, both formally registered with the local authorities as well as informally associated among different practitioners and academics in particular fields of activity, that lead the way for changes to be made to local legislation and funding mechanisms in order to nurture various expressions of art, from the traditional to the contemporary, and support the pertinent educational and training components in schools, colleges and higher education institutions.

The COVID-19 Art Alliance Advocacy Group, for example, is active in Tunisia.¹⁴ As happens elsewhere, it rallies together different actors in the arts scene, in the main operating in the independent sector and through civil society organisations and arts associations. Through physical meetings and effective digital fora and other communication channels, it pursues a clear consultative and advocacy mission. At the core of its vision, it sets out six priority areas to be addressed:

¹¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W7QTdbTTzNB-4CtOZeYmHYB2CoEy3-rS/view> P72

¹² https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135961-nenh9f2w7a&title=Culture-shock-COVID-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors P4-5

¹³ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135961-nenh9f2w7a&title=Culture-shock-COVID-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors P11

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/artallianceadvocacy>

- First, it calls on state authorities to support and enable a digital component, and where advisable, an actual transition, for the management of public and private arts stakeholders, principally by providing training.
- Second, it recommends across-the-board simplification. In ways that have been experienced to stifling degrees of late in Malta, a territory where growing financial services have been leading to abuses, while due diligence is required, treating not-for-profit organisations the same as large enterprises at a time like this is counterproductive to the recovery of the sector.
- Third, it advocates the constant upgrading of IT infrastructure and the skills that need to go with its administration.
- Fourth, it proposes the development of new and innovative programming to tackle stagnation and undue repetition of certain productions.
- Fifth, it advances the use of electronic platforms that cut across genres and industries to seek new audiences and income streams.
- Sixth, it recommends flexibility and long-sightedness to embrace rapidly shifting scenarios.

3.3 In Europe

The impact of the pandemic on European societies has been widely documented and great attention has been paid to the cultural aspects of life. It is worth referring to a number of timely reports that have something interesting in common: as has already pointed out with regard to previously quoted research, they avoid detaching culture and the arts from the other important elements of society, acknowledging and stressing the inter-relation of the cultural facets of communities with the economic, educational, social and other segments that need attention and sometimes, as in the case of the health sector, prioritisation even before the arts.

Furthermore, such reports are positive and worthwhile documents because they avoid pitting the different needs of societies against one another, or simply ranking them in importance. Rather, they adopt a holistic approach that looks at the symbiosis between different areas, say, of creativity and wellbeing, and emphasise the significance of policy that addresses aspects of human life in as inclusive a manner as possible.

This approach defies the mechanical segmentation of people into categories and is admittedly not only necessary, but refreshing, in the context of other pieces of research that tend to adopt a narrow focus in order to respond to a particular need, be it a commission by a private industry player, a consortium implementing a particular funded piece of research, or one trying to make a case for a particular area of practice that is somehow presented as being in competition with others, as admittedly is many times the case when government budgets are dedicated to different areas needing attention, or sponsors deciding whom to support.

The wide-angle approach recalls various thinkers and writers of a liberal tradition that have reflected on the way we human beings seem to have given away a great deal of the progress we have achieved since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century in Europe.

As commented by various leftist philosophers and economists that may be identified with Marxist strains of thought, from Karl Marx himself and Friedrich Engels to Herbert Marcuse and others associated with the Frankfurt School and Douglas Kellner, arguably the leading commentator on Marcuse's writings in the English language, over the centuries people seem to have allowed their critical and creative thinking approaches with which they challenged traditional constraints to human liberties based on religious dogma and societal hierarchies to be ensnared by their technological prowess.

In the *One-Dimensional Man*, for instance, Marcuse elaborates his reflections on how during the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and the US society seemed to have given itself up to new forms of totalitarianism that were based less on political coercion and more on pervasive economic determinants. Individuals and their communities seemed to have been reduced to producers and consumers, therefore one-dimensional, compromising their creative nature by aligning their lives with market priorities that stifled diversity, innovation and alternative ways of organising social and economic life to mainstream capitalism.¹⁵

More recently, the Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés commented on the progressive loss of creativity to standardisation in problem-solving described as 'solutionism':

'Education, knowledge and science sink, today, in a loss of prestige. They can resurface only if they can show they can offer workable, technical and economic solutions. Solutionism is the alibi of a knowledge that has lost the attribution of making us better, as people and as a society. We no longer believe this is possible, and therefore only ask for solutions and more solutions. We do not believe we can improve ourselves, but only gain more or less privileges in a span of time that goes nowhere, because we have given up on aiming for a better future.'¹⁶

The need to strike a balance between functional and humanistic approaches and seek synergies that thrive off them is emphasised by many of the reports referred to in this text. The UCLG has been particularly active in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on European society with particular attention paid to the cultural dimension. For example, it states that the:

'COVID-19 crisis has affected the cultural life in cities extraordinarily, with implications for the existing inequalities to access, participation and contribution to culture, access to public spaces, and the financial sustainability and the flow of cultural goods and services. The impact of the crisis on the values that constitute our societies are impossible to calculate at this stage.'¹⁷

¹⁵ https://www.stereolux.org/sites/default/files/fichiers/marcuse_h_-_one_dimensional_man_2nd_edn._routledge_2002.compressed.pdf

¹⁶ La educación, el saber y la ciencia se hunden también, hoy, en un desprestigio del que solo pueden salvarse si se muestran capaces de ofrecer soluciones laborales, soluciones técnicas, soluciones económicas. El solucionismo es la coartada (alibi) de un saber que ha perdido la atribución de hacernos mejores, como personas y como sociedad. Ya no creemos en ello y por eso le pedimos soluciones y nada más que soluciones. No contamos ya con hacernos mejores a nosotros mismos sino solamente en obtener más o menos privilegios en un tiempo que no va a ninguna parte, porque ha renunciado a apuntar a un futuro mejor.' Marina Garcés, 2017, *Nueva ilustración radical*, 4th edition, Editorial Anagrama, Barcelona, P8.

¹⁷ https://www.interarts.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/report_8_-_culture_cities_covid19_-_eng_0-compressed.pdf P6

The focus on urban conglomerations in this analysis is significant. Indeed, cities have been among the first and worst affected areas of social congregation, but also those first to respond. The UCLG report notes how many people living together and engaged in various degrees of economic and cultural life make cities particularly vulnerable to challenges like pandemics. In a way that is evocative of Brazilian urbanist and politician Jaime Lerner's vision of intervening in places where the city tissue fails, carefully yet directly, with reference to the practice of 'urban acupuncture', the UCLG highlights how cities have traditionally been the place where numerous creative solutions are devised.¹⁸

Cities are able to respond quickly to changes by rethinking and reinventing urban spaces in ways that allow them to become more resilient. Cities have demonstrated their capacity to adapt to contexts that evolve with time. A UNESCO report observes how the diverse neighbourhoods that may contribute to cities may encourage urban development to be multifaceted and include different transformational aspects and dimensions.¹⁹

The report highlights the agility with which certain cities have been able to devise actions that have been locally relevant. It calls for future models of urban development to acknowledge the strong bonds that exist between the diverse dimensions of city planning across different levels of governance. It notes how the various experiences of cities and the innovative solutions that emerged may teach us how to 'create more sustainable and equitable urban living environments for tomorrow and have better-informed policy-making in the coming months.'²⁰

In Europe, one may find many instances of action having been taken by national and local authorities to help artists and other practitioners in the cultural field get through these past few months and be in a better position not only to survive, but also, and very importantly, to plan for the future in stable and sustainable ways. As in other areas of society, on a national level a high standard seems to have been set by Germany. By early April the federal government had delivered a €50 billion bailout package for freelancers and small businesses including artists. Single grants of up to €9,000 available to self-employed artists and businesses with up to five employees, and larger €15,000 grants available to businesses with up to 10 employees, swiftly started being transferred to thousands of applicants.²¹

These measures were taken in light of the challenging situation facing the different areas within the cultural sector and the hardship and uncertainty experienced by artists and other creatives in this field. For instance, recent estimates in Germany have shown that companies are increasingly laying off employees due to insolvency issues. The overall unemployment rate of 6.2% in June 2020 is higher than the unemployment rate in the economy in general at 5.2%, and has been rising continuously, from 63,696 unemployed in March to 85,661 in June 2020. Indeed, there are notable variations across sub-sectors; for instance, software developers are unemployed at a rate of 3.2%, product and visual

¹⁸ <https://sites.google.com/site/porabooks039/download-pdf-books-urban-acupuncture-by---jaime-lerner-full-books>

¹⁹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373940> P3

²⁰ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373940> P3

²¹ <https://neustartkultur.de/>. However, it is worth noting that in private conversation with the author, an artist based in Germany noted how this financial support was tied to specific payments for services incurred. For instance, money could not be spent on food or other basic necessities but only on project-related services.

designers at 9.20% and 10.6% respectively, and the performing arts at 13.10%. These figures stress the atypical conditions of cultural employment in these sectors.²²

The Catalan organisation Interarts that like the UCLG has its base in Barcelona provides useful insights into city contexts. For instance, Lisbon extended a support system to agents and entities in the cultural sector through a social emergency municipal funding mechanism that included €250,000 for urgent and immediate financial support for stakeholders and €1 million to reinforce the city's cultural programme dedicated to agents not covered by other support systems. Other measures included an exemption from the payment of rents of all social, cultural, sporting or recreational institutions housed in municipal quarters until 30 June, and the covering of those contracts already signed by cultural entities.

Barcelona launched ten measures to support culture in the city. These included a special subsidy of €1 million with special attention paid to the weakest structures linked to grassroots culture; advanced payments for companies and artists; a special investment of €1 million for the city's libraries; the restructuring of the calendar of large events and festivals to avoid cancellations; and the expansion of programmes to include as many cancelled productions as possible. This action was followed by a second package of eleven measures founded on an investment of an additional €1,670,000 that included aid for the physical adaptation of cultural spaces in post-COVID-19 scenarios and a new Citizens' Office of Culture.²³

3.4 In Malta

Amidst what appeared to be the peak of the second wave of contagion in August 2020, Maltese news portals published and commented on data reflecting the significant and growing number of people at the risk of poverty in 2018 and 2019.²⁴ It is interesting to note that just a year earlier, data reflected a much more positive picture of the general economic climate.²⁵ Then Malta seemed to enjoy the fifth-lowest risk of in-work poverty among EU countries (at the time including the UK); at 5.9% the risk of in-work poverty in Malta was significantly lower than the EU average (9.6%). Anna Borg, who compiled the report referred to here, notes that this trend can be noted as far back as 2012, when the in-work poverty rate in Malta was 5.2%, as against 8.9% at the EU level.

From the perspective of local politics, this five-year period of economic growth is generally linked to the impetus enjoyed in local and foreign investment in Malta due to a shift from a conservative government at the end of its nearly uninterrupted twenty-five year position in power to a younger and more liberal and purportedly left-leaning political movement. Indeed, this period is marked by economic and financial development and growth centred on foreign direct investment that benefited from serious financial incentives and management and regulatory mechanisms that boosted construction, international gaming based in Malta and mass tourism.

²² https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135961-nenh9f2w7a&title=Culture-shock-COVID-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors P14

²³ https://www.interarts.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/report_8_-_culture_cities_covid19_-_eng_0-compressed.pdf P18

²⁴ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/eu-survey-finds-82758-at-risk-of-poverty-in-malta.813069>

²⁵ <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/46188>

While the population grew on the basis of relatively large numbers of imported labour, various sectors seemed to enjoy their own slice of the growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, underlying this economic growth lay severe limitations to its sustainability.

The key areas negatively affected were the environment, constantly compromised and undermined by construction actively supported by governing and economic forces at the expense of the maintenance of public open spaces and cultural heritage; the democratic rule of law eroded, in Malta as elsewhere in the EU, once membership of the European block was secured and economic priorities superseded citizenship concerns; the diminishing of Malta's international reputation and standing encapsulated by the still unresolved murder of high-profile investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in October 2017; and a general impoverishment of the quality of life of people in Malta as well as, for common people without enough political clout or connections, from an economic perspective.²⁶

In this context, the beginning of the spread of COVID-19 in March 2020 seemed to further incline the apparent and existing general well-being of people in Malta, in ways that have been witnessed elsewhere in the EU as well as globally.

3.4.1 Cultural weaknesses: from pre-COVID-19 to the pandemic

Certain problems experienced by people and organisations that work in and earn a living and their sense of satisfaction in the areas of culture and the arts once COVID-19 set in existed before. This text argues that none of the problems were *created* by the virus. Rather, some of them seem to have become worse, but clearly existed before, as some examples below will try to show. Others may be argued to be the responsibility of the mismanagement of the situation induced by coronavirus, rather than simply due to it.

Indeed, some significant challenges faced by festivals and productions, as well as public and private institutions and organisations, from museums to cinemas, from traditional religious *festi* to indoor and outdoor productions like theatre or music, are strongly related to the contagion of the virus between people if these are close together. However, the implementation of social distancing guidelines and rules, the uneven application of regulations, information which has been at times contradictory, suppressed, censored or simply false, both from official sources as well as non-official ones, is the responsibility of society and its institutions, rather than the virus itself.

The text now turns to a few examples, hinted at above, of how the Maltese infrastructure, in similar ways to other territories, seems to have failed to plan enough ahead, and has now shown grave limitations when faced by the pandemic:

- a. Over the past few decades, one of the preferred areas for local investment in the creative sector has been foreign film production.²⁷ Between 2013 and 2019, a more aggressive strategy led to more than 50 productions filmed in Malta in excess of

²⁶ <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/52063>; https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en.

²⁷ *World Film Locations Malta*, 2015, edited by Jean Pierre Borg and Charlie Cauchi, Intellect Books, Bristol, P5. *Gladiator* (1999) is identified as the catalyst for novel investment in the industry.

€200 million in foreign direct investment being injected into the economy.²⁸

Nevertheless, the effects of COVID-19 highlight the weak long-term and sustainable planning and infrastructure upkeep that has hamstrung the industry. It is telling that the film-making sector, represented by the Malta Producers Association (MPA), had to lobby hard with national authorities to secure a degree of state support.²⁹ The MPA, like others in the creative industries and elsewhere in the economy, felt left to its own devices for long stretches of time, with repeated requests for close consultations with the pertinent authorities being ignored or denied.³⁰

- b. It is unfortunate, yet not any more surprising, that to a large degree cultural governance in Malta reflects the clientelist approach of managing economic and social life.³¹ Self-serving governance systems that undercut private initiative that are not reliant or servile to state agents and agencies are reminiscent of the description of 'state apparatus' as elaborated by Louis Althusser.³²
- c. Sufficient financial and consultative support by arts-oriented government agencies, when these exist at all, has also been found wanting. Arts Council Malta stepped in by re-channelling funding for the arts with a Special Fund 2020 capped at €7,500 per grant. By its own admission, Arts Council Malta received an 'overwhelming response' to this fund issued specifically to support artists amidst the crisis, albeit the EUR75,000 made available consisted of a relocation of money, rather than new, and made accessible only to 11 applicants.³³

Therefore, no special funds addressing the survival of artists and their organisations, as was the case elsewhere and as discussed above, were considered or made possible.³⁴ In the light of the attempt of this text to relate culture and the arts as closely as possible to the rest of society, one would be tempted to say that, in the Maltese context, if even basic support to the arts sector is denied or simply not considered to be important enough, other initiatives like a universal basic income scheme that is installed and inclusive of the cultural sector are unlikely, to say the least. Once again, the German context provides an insightful context that may still act as an inspiration should there be the political and economic will to follow up.³⁵ After six months the most national authorities seem to have been ready to concede, it seems fitting to say, rather than be proactive to support the sector, was a press release clarifying that state vouchers issued earlier in the year to subsidise public spending could also be used for the arts. This was done in response to yet another effort by arts and entertainment sectors representatives, more about who follows, to

²⁸ <https://maltafilmcommission.com/about-us/>

²⁹ <http://mediterranee-audiovisuelle.com/malta-the-malta-producers-association-mpa-makes-its-point/?lang=en>

³⁰ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/film-producers-say-industry-in-malta-must-diversify.813138>;

<https://theshiftnews.com/2020/08/19/jurassic-film-production-scales-back-production-due-to-covid-mishandling/>;

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/review-of-malta-film-commission-being-kept-under-wraps-association.814470>

³¹ <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2020-08-31/blogs-opinions/Clientelism-6736226526>. This recent comment by former Prime Minister and current MEP Alfred Sant goes straight to the point of the matter.

³² <https://theshiftnews.com/2020/06/13/government-accused-of-monopolising-culture/>

³³ <https://www.artscouncilmalta.org/news/95-artists-apply-for-covid-19-arts-fund-in-overwhelming-response>

³⁴ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/facing-up-to-covid-19-with-culture-2020.786443>

³⁵ https://www.businessinsider.com/germany-begins-universal-basic-income-trial-three-years-2020-8?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=sf-bi-main&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR3QHq58wsLfqMl5lWxTYZcdilq6NFTbm2c6ecDUtGru8mvtEYVWVg5WQMqC;

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/world/germans-sign-up-for-universal-basic-income-5qng9bdkj?fbclid=IwAR0ki9VZooDRqMVoo9817HYQ4O5MN9ttDMu7d-ilrpkIRRY0sc2m9YR4Tl>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/world/germans-sign-up-for-universal-basic-income-5qng9bdkj?fbclid=IwAR0ki9VZooDRqMVoo9817HYQ4O5MN9ttDMu7d-ilrpkIRRY0sc2m9YR4Tl>

bring authorities to acknowledge the critical situation faced by their colleagues and members.³⁶

Artists and organisations make the most of existing state funding but are aware of the self-sufficiency, including funding alternatives, they need to develop. This is also because, interestingly in a way that is closely related to point b. above, even a state-owned cultural organisation has benefitted from the state's own awards scheme (not for the first time, but maybe more strikingly due to the COVID-19 context). This case belongs to what was first planned as a European Capital of Culture (held in Valletta in 2018) project, then as a legacy project, to open in stages between the end of 2020 and 2021, namely the Valletta Design Cluster.³⁷

- d. Alternative funding sources to the state are not easily accessible for independent organisations as well as national ones. Tapping into EU funds remains challenging for many organisations and individual artists as shown by low participation and success rates ever since Malta joined the EU in 2004.³⁸

3.4.2 Relevance of the arts in Malta: pre- and post-COVID-19

The topic of the relevance of the arts to society outside the cultural community has been discussed long before the onset of COVID-19. Below are two instances of this.

Professor Raphael Vella, responsible for enabling many creative collaborations in between the field of education and the arts as well as being an internationally recognised visual artist who also represented Malta at the Venice Biennale (2015), has regularly expressed concern about the relevance of the arts in Maltese society. He has noted that there seems to be a lack of awareness and sensitivity towards artistic and cultural values in many areas of our society, manifesting serious gaps at various levels. As an educator he witnesses this lack at low and high levels of the education cycle, which eventually becomes pronounced in adult society. Over time this gap seems to have become institutionalised, with educational and cultural institutions themselves displaying glaringly low levels of understanding and sensitivity towards the arts and people who work in that sector.³⁹

From the perspective of social enterprise, this area of economic activity that strives to assert its practice in community-oriented outcomes has also faced challenging times before the pandemic. A European conference (COST) on the topic in November 2019 and convened by Dr Ċensu Caruana, an environmental educator and practitioner at the University of Malta,

³⁶ <https://lovinmalta.com/news/give-people-in-malta-e20-vouchers-to-spend-on-the-arts-entertainment-group-says/>;
<https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/DOI/Press%20Releases/Pages/2020/September/17/pr201753en.aspx>

³⁷ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/after-the-storm-how-will-covid-19-impact-the-arts.792605?fbclid=IwAR3jXqNwHOTqzTIWuqihVN9-KppWQUrT2-YILvLwx9rW03JHGUTA4YKCU>

³⁸ <https://www.i-portunus.eu/about-the-programme/i-portunus-statistics/third-call-2019/>;

<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/library/creative-europe-monitoring-report-2018.pdf>

³⁹ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/in-malta-arts-are-a-means-to-a-commercial-end-raphael-vella.722095>;

<https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/101641/home-is-where-the-art-is-raphael-vella#.X0D8nMqzZPY>;

<https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/news/features/2020/04/art-new-path-raphael-vella>;

<https://lovinmalta.com/opinion/guest-commentary-the-conspicuous-absence-of-the-arts-in-maltas-proposed-sixth-form-syllabus-reform/>

highlighted these difficulties by bringing together various creative entrepreneurs working closely with social and cultural partners.⁴⁰

Since the onset of COVID-19, many encounters and working groups among or involving creatives have embraced online platforms that are hosting inspiring discussions that reflect similar points of view to those expressed before March 2020, albeit with the added difficulties faced since. Such conversations suggest a global diversity of experience as well as a convergence of efforts towards seeking the best ways forward. Locally-led endeavours have been rapidly active, such as those initiated by ARC Research Consultancy for the Arts Council Malta Labs, Culture Venture and the Meetings of Minds series by Experience Design.

In general, varying degrees of scepticism are expressed and temper the ever-present hope and ambition also manifested by creatives and artists. During one such session hosted by the informal female-led arts group YCI on 20 August 2020, theatre and music educator and practitioner Rosetta Debattista spoke eloquently about the importance of keeping the arts relevant to society. In a comment I asked her to provide in order to represent her thoughts on the matter as faithfully as possible, Rosetta wrote to me saying:

‘The Arts in their very essence are about expression and connection. During such testing times, there is much to be expressed and every opportunity for connection would only be of benefit to the human soul. Humanity is resilient and part of that resilience is due to our very nature, one that seeks to release and receive emotions. The Arts can allow this exchange so beautifully. This global pandemic needs a universal language - the Arts.’⁴¹

From a practical perspective, creative professionals and practitioners in Malta are not experiencing an easy period or being able to plan much ahead in a sound or stable way. With regard to state support measures, it is worth noting that wage supplements do apply to the creative sector although at the time of writing they are literally featured as the last category in the last list. Nevertheless, the possibility of applying for a subsidy that provides a monthly support of circa EUR600 for full-timers and EUR375 for part-timers exists and is literally better than nothing. It will be interesting to wait for the possibility of accessing the official statistics regarding the rate of take-up of this source of minimal funding for survival in the short term.⁴²

The difficult current situation and bleak outlook for the arts in Malta is well captured by a recent editorial in the leading English language newspaper in Malta, namely *The Times of Malta*.⁴³ This perspective is elaborated on well by Pamela Kerr, member of the Malta Entertainment Industry and Art Association (MEIA), hinted at earlier, and representing dance within the organisation. Writing on 12 September, she said:

⁴⁰ <http://www.empoworse.eu/events/3rd-wg-2-research-workshop-on-unlocking-the-transformative-potential-of-culture-and-the-arts/?fbclid=IwAR1WFEMLKiOSBTv4rdihBx056MnUeagQOTGpNh8n51nSvnrIVBFAfz0OkU8>

⁴¹ From private email dated 24 September 2020. An early overview of the challenges facing artists and expressed across different media was put together by writer and scriptwriter Teo Reljic:

https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/arts/cultural_diary/101371/can_our_cultural_sector_survive_the_pandemic#.X0D_b8qzZPY

⁴² <https://covid19.maltaenterprise.com/wage-supplement-july-september/>

⁴³ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/second-wave-struggles-in-arts.816057>

'MEIA president Howard Keith believes that the dance sector is one of the pillars of the creative sector. He recently said that everyone is eager to work and although everyone understands the restrictions imposed due to COVID-19, everyone in the industry expects significant action to be taken. "It's already six months too late," Keith noted. "Unfortunately, currently not only is our effort and contribution not being recognised but we are being devalued and left to fend for ourselves," they lamented.'⁴⁴

A week later, on 20 September, Toni Attard, cultural strategist and manager and also vice president of MEIA, kept up the tempo by commenting at length on the limited timeline many creatives and professionals in the arts were facing unless consequential policies and measures were taken to provide finance support before monetary commitments and burdens forced them to give up their careers and pursuits and seek to earn a living elsewhere. The figures for people employed in the sector, 4,924, and the self-employed, 414, may appear small in general terms, but relative to Malta, they are significant and reflective of a diverse and resourceful community that however urgently needs a rethink, and recalibration, of state support systems.⁴⁵

4. Conclusion: where to next?

At the time of writing this conclusion (October 2020) not much has been planned or implemented in Malta beyond the piecemeal and minimal efforts described above. Towards the end of August 2020 Arts Council Malta did establish a timetable for a series of online meetings with people and organisations from the sector to provide a platform of advice and consultation on how to mitigate the efforts of COVID-19 on practitioners of the arts sector. While well-intentioned, the efforts seem to fulfil the adage of too little, too late.⁴⁶ On a more tangible and financial level, preparatory documents for the national financial budget for 2021 generated by the ministry for economic development show an intention to prolong measures to sustain artists through the minimum wage supplement and promote its category from the lowest to the highest; in practice this may mean an increase from an average of EUR400 per month to EUR650 per month.⁴⁷

Where does this leave people and organisations outside government in the practice of their skills and the earning of their livelihood? It may be argued that it is the individual artist-entrepreneur who is again left to their own devices to find a way forward. Fortunately, there seem to be occurrences of individuals and small companies coming together in order to engage in joint-up thinking and run advocacy and lobbying campaigns, addressed at the state and the private sector, as indicated by the newly formed MEIA, referred to above.⁴⁸

From an international technical point of view, a number of practices may already be witnessed. For instance, the arts scene in the UK has already developed ways of scaling

⁴⁴ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/the-dance-situation-in-malta.817554>

⁴⁵ https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/interview/104820/our_economy_depends_on_creativity_too_toni_attard#.X2stlGqzZPY

⁴⁶ <https://www.covid19transitionarts.mt/?fbclid=IwAR07b3nP4ITqrQIX3x1jK1sJYn3N9p3STzng0aVBP1IxXqWRbe2oa43H92A>

⁴⁷ Information was shared informally with the author at the time of writing.

⁴⁸ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/arts-sector-wants-covid-wage-supplement.813561>

down former large productions, and trying to engage with digital means as much as possible, in partnership with the more traditional means of expression.⁴⁹

At the same time, traditional ways of coming together and engaging in the arts seem to be undergoing a process of revival and are being rediscovered in practice as well as research. The value of extending, maintaining and sustaining networks⁵⁰ is accompanied by a renewed realisation of the importance of recognising recovery of the arts sector as a fundamental matter of diversity, since society and the economy are made of different contributors and participants. The outlook for Malta, as is the case elsewhere, is nevertheless challenging, even though within the services sector, culture and the arts have a direct economic role, as well as many indirect ones.⁵¹

Therefore, in an attempt to offer a general conclusion to this reflection on the global response to the impact of COVID-19 on culture and the arts with particular reference to the European context and especially Malta, a further reference to the UCLG may be useful. The network notes that the crisis facing culture and the arts has meant there is a challenge to think ways anew:

‘the crisis has generated hundreds of thousands of initiatives, from new and unplanned actions in public spaces to online events, recordings, collections and, of course, the emergence of totally new initiatives that have Covid-19 as the central topic. Some of these initiatives have been led by the cultural networks, organisations or institutions, while some others have been created spontaneously by citizens. People have turned to culture to create meaning, to show solidarity and to understand the situation we are living through. There cannot be a better illustration of why culture needs to consolidate as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. (This narrative is at the heart of UCLG’s Culture Committee mission, and understands “culture” in order of appearance in the global conversation on sustainable development; not in hierarchy.)⁵²

Recognising the significance of the cultural sector to the ways in which we interact with one another and within our communities is accompanied by the realisation of the importance of the way we relate to space, people and the diversity within our societies and our environments. As noted by musician and producer David Byrne:

‘It’s not enough to have talented musicians. It also takes a wide variety of venues, opportunities for creatives to cross-pollinate, and affordable housing. A confluence of external factors helps encourage the latent talent in a community to flourish.⁵³

This document quoted here is itself a good example of combining different elements of a community in order to develop programmes and plans both immediate and long-term in collaboration with other communities within wider society.

⁴⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lets-scale-down-opera-hxvcwk966>; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dominic-dromgoole-why-we-created-the-globe-player-lxnjz8t2z>

⁵⁰ https://ijhem.com/cdn/article_file/2020-08-30-12-27-58-PM.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0IAoRlPFuAdXeDdlzalgppNI09-RkyolvQ0B5nviMTINZQGzNQWdR3BA

⁵¹ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/what-creates-our-economic-wealth.817329>

⁵² https://www.interarts.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/report_8_-_culture_cities_covid19_-_eng_0-compressed.pdf P7

⁵³ <https://www.sounddiplomacy.com/better-music-cities> P10

Likewise, this text I have written recommends further research that is integrated into a variety of social fields that look at culture and the arts as an important part of a wider whole. The following extract is taken from a report by the World Cities Culture Forum that looks at the value of cities as nodal points of human life. An important aspect is the particular relation to our environment and matters of sustainability:

‘As well as inspiring case studies, this latest research also recognises the opportunities available to cities to accelerate their environmental ambitions and embed them within cultural practice. We have identified the following opportunities:

- **Research and Publish:** Research creative and cultural initiatives across your city which engage with environmental themes and practices. Publish an online resource to encourage new collaborations and good practice exchange and help build environmental knowledge, awareness and inspiration within the sector.
- **Regular Conversations:** Organise a regular meeting or working group to support ongoing collaboration between cultural and environmental departments. This will support the implementation of city strategy, progressing the goals of both departments as they relate to sustainable development. It will also encourage new ideas and partnerships, and identification of combined resource.
- **Join Policy Together:** Connect cultural and environmental policy and strategy so that they are mutually-reinforcing. Aligning cultural policy and targets to environmental ambitions – considering city, national and international policy frameworks (e.g. the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals) – will support a resilient and efficient cultural infrastructure which can publicly champion climate and environmental action.
- **Smart Public Art:** Include environmental sustainability within public art frameworks as both a creative programming theme, and also as an operational commitment to environmental good practice. Develop guidelines on the environmental impacts of materials, sourcing, construction and transportation.
- **Get the Evidence:** Monitor and report the environmental impact data of cultural activity, improving environmental literacy and understanding of performance and improvement. Calculating the return on investment of low-carbon and energy-efficiency projects will evidence the benefits of environmental interventions and provide a business case for further investment.⁵⁴

Post scriptum

In a bizarre turn of events, at the time of schools opening again at the beginning of October, a senior public health advisor for the state agency Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Unit called for a complete wipe-out of arts, cultural and sports education after school hours provided by professionals and amateurs in the field.⁵⁵ A strong reaction by the sectors involved followed soon after. One reference will suffice:

‘But her advice sparked reactions from an industry that feels it has been ignored throughout the crisis, with the head of the arts education subcommittee within Malta

⁵⁴ https://juliesbicycle.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WCCF_Report_June_28_FINAL_v4.pdf P7

⁵⁵ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/stop-social-life-to-keep-schools-safe.820099>

Entertainment Industry and Arts Association saying: “We are really upset about this, seeing that the protocols we worked on had been approved by the health authorities.”⁵⁶

It seems that there is a great deal of work still to be done with regard to bringing closer different concerns and requirements in society when facing the pandemic and envisioning the next steps. To accompany this effort and act as a guiding light, the recent Spanish political drive within the senate to recognise culture as a public, essential good, is something to hold on to and be inspired by.⁵⁷

Special thanks go to Toni Attard, François Carbon and Margerita Pulè for valuable conversations related to this text as well as students, fellow researchers and guests on my current radio programme on cultural policy available here:

<https://www.um.edu.mt/services/campusfm/ondemand>.

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9 October 2020

<https://culturalpolicy.blog/>

⁵⁶ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/arts-and-sports-education-strict-covid-protocols-are-in-place.820555>. The protocols referred to are here:

https://issuu.com/meiamt/docs/meia_covid_protocols_for_dance_dra_e4f071f6f03fea?fbclid=IwAR2KHDGZ5P8exMMKudFN_Mjy5wtJ323R-iUQUL5OTibcvCEuF7rnQEbl7Ycl

⁵⁷ https://www.finestresullarte.info/attualita/spagna-mozione-senato-cultura-bene-essenziale?fbclid=IwAR1iiaK9C_8AKKmsGJwPUZUqr4mpcsq4GuPo_PgpBEILthC8jsLPtZ_9dkM