



International cultural cooperation from the margins

I am an islander from the smallest nation in the European Union that's still reconciling its colonial past as part of the Commonwealth. This has shaped my identity as Maltese, Mediterranean and European. Professionally, I juggle cultural policy making with artistic production. The voices to leave the island and seek growth somewhere bigger conflict until this very day with those encouraging me to embrace island life – far from the idyllic touristic gaze of beaches and a slower way of life. For years I struggled to operate within an environment of international cultural relations. Cultural diplomacy was relatively inexistent and access to European networks was very poor. As cultural strategist I had the privilege of working on my country's infrastructure for international cultural cooperation. However, this work was not just a catching up exercise on cultural policy trends but a frantic attempt at doubling efforts to address geo-political and cultural insularity. The smaller and more isolated you are, the harder you need to work to address the imbalances in international cultural cooperation, especially when a level playing field on a political level seems to be impossible to achieve. Whereas international treaties and agreements, Capital-to-Capital cultural diplomacy, political efforts to address reconciliation and reparations emanating from colonial past, have value in identity politics, what impact do these efforts have on our communities and the creative growth of our regions?

Fair play and equity in international cultural cooperation call for a stronger focus on the mobilization of cultural and creative practitioners to centre stage – not for nation building or regional cultural tokenism but for the genuine belief that **mobility**, seen here as a right, enables creativity, connections, exploration, and learning. This is of particular importance to those living in countries who do not have access to transcontinental mobility opportunities through public funding or cultural institutes.

Major barriers to mobility sound like a broken record - insufficient funds, lack of information and infrastructure, informal and formal restraints on travel and immigration policies, gaps in intercultural communication and difference in historical trails that impose exclusion prejudice. The barriers are exacerbated further for Islanders and people living in peripheral territories who are also challenged with poorer connectivity and cultural infrastructure. I empathise with Martinique based artist Annabelle Gueredrat's observations in *On the Move's* report cultural **Mobility Flows**, who stated that “ it is very difficult to move within the Caribbean space, either because the island has not yet developed relations with the other English and Spanish speaking islands, or because one must go through Paris to get to Haiti”. This adds an additional challenge to the current discourse on the reduction in physical mobility through fossil fuelled means of transportation and shifting towards environmentally responsible behaviour and operational choices. The pandemic has shown that mobility can have different varieties, but the question remains whether those varieties work. Some local cultural ecosystems have significant weaknesses in their infrastructure, especially when it comes to specialized facilities or digital connectivity. So online streaming, virtual residencies, digital co-creation are only possible to those who have the means and knowledge to do so.

Cultural ecosystems with limited resources are insufficient to support all local artists – often forcing them to compete against each other – leading to a lack of cooperation and networking among peers, and to some artists choosing to migrate to other countries.

We cannot have equitable international cultural co-operation before strengthening resources on the ground. My call is to continue investing in building sustainable local cultural ecosystems for creative communities to **develop, co-create and lead** international cultural cooperation built on their **own needs and aspirations**. It is only when we build programmes on grassroots knowledge and facilitate participatory processes can we start shifting the narrative in international cultural cooperation.

Information is key and mobility funding guides are an important step towards improved mobility of cultural and creative practitioners between Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Next year On the Move will be working on a new Mobility Funding Guide focusing on the Caribbean. A second important element is the prioritisation of these inequalities in new or existing mobility funding programmes that address **mobility to and from** peripheral territories and small islands – a one size fits all model does not work. Access to mobility funding is scarce in numerous regions and many stakeholders complain of the lack of opportunities to travel within the same region let alone to other regions. Of relevance is the challenge of ‘South-South’ mobility and artist-led mobility initiatives.

The call for more effective, equitable and impactful mobility of and by artists within the European Union is also relatively new. With a budget of €21 million, Culture Moves Europe offers mobility grants to around 7,000 artists, cultural professionals and host organisations across 41 Creative Europe Countries from 2022 to 2025. Can this be a good model to develop a Culture Moves EULAC programme? As member of the monitoring and evaluation panel of the European Capitals of Culture, I would also like to encourage more coordinated efforts to increase the level of cooperation between candidate and selected cities and cities from Latin America and the Caribbean. Some of the bids focus on peripheries and islands. All of them seek to address global issues which can benefit from active participation of Latin American and Caribbean nations and which, to date, remains underdeveloped.

What is the future of mobility? A research project I was involved in led by the European culture foundation and Kultura Nova foundation, attempted to shed light on slow mobility as the scenario for the future of mobility and culture. Slow mobility is in fact not exclusively a reaction towards climate justice - a call to turn from quick and frequent traveling to an altered mobility concept grounded in sustainable dynamics rather than growth expectations. It is a way of slowing down and the step towards embracing slowness is one of the principles that can add to the achievement of more meaningful, calmer, healthier and egalitarian modes of functioning **in and with** the cultural sectors and **for all** the actors involved, from individuals to communities.

What we cannot do is slow down our efforts in international cultural cooperation. The opportunities are great but the consequences of not doing so are greater, especially with the rise of populism and its correlation with disenfranchised communities on the peripheries. Let's not forget that London did not choose Brexit, San Francisco did not vote for Trump but

most Dutch provinces except the Caribbean Netherlands and two others voted for anti-Islam populist leader Geert Wilders.

International cultural cooperation is not the panacea of global challenges. No stand-alone initiative ever is.

Firstly, we must acknowledge the inequalities that exist on the peripheries and how existing dominant models continue to perpetuate these imbalances. Secondly, Member States will probably do more with assistance on the ground to address the gaps that already exist than with new recommendations that may widen the gap. Together we can build better and more resilient local ecosystems as catalysts for international cooperation. Thirdly, identify one to three key actions, even experimental and small scale, that the EULAC foundation can take the lead on, focused exclusively on culture and with the objective to address these imbalances (be they match funded microgrants, policy labs, training and research initiatives etc) as catalysts for inclusive partnerships, to mobilise ideas across borders and beyond the margins, through co-design and co-creation.

Toni Attard

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