

Contribution to the 7th Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VII) on the **Economies of Equality and Care**

How cultural rights can enable practices of care

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1. Introduction

This short paper aims to discuss how cultural rights, and cultural policies and programmes guided by them, can embody and contribute to practices and values of care, and how some cultural values and practices can enhance care for one another and for the planet. It also reflects on what a concern with care implies in the design and implementation of cultural policies and programmes. The paper builds, among other things, on the knowledge and experience of the UCLG Committee on Culture, which since 2004 has promoted approaches to cultural policies based on cultural rights and other human rights, as a way to enhance the understanding of how culture is a fundamental dimension of sustainability, particularly at the local level.

In so doing, the paper should enrich UCLG’s understanding of care, in the framework of the GOLD VII process and other initiatives resulting from the UCLG Pact for the Future – Daejeon Political Declaration. In this context, the UCLG Committee on Culture is planning other contributions, including a longer paper on culture as an infrastructure for caring cities and regions, which will build on, and further develop, the ideas presented in this short paper.

This is an exploration of how cultural rights can embody care-based approaches, how cultural policies based on cultural rights can also illustrate care, and how cultural values and the practices they embody can enhance care for one another and for the planet.

1.1. Exercising cultural rights as an enabler of care for one another

In the policy realm, care involves integrating empathy and solidarity with others, and fostering social justice and equality as the building blocks of a just, sustainable and thriving society. There are several ways in which policies inspired by cultural rights can illustrate such an approach:

- Recognising and fulfilling cultural rights should involve considering inequalities and hindrances that prevent full participation in cultural life. The Rome Charter, adopted in 2020, suggests that cities and local governments should protect the cultural rights of all, especially of minorities and Indigenous peoples, and embed the perspective of women, children and young people in their cultural policies. In this respect, policies inspired by cultural rights should pay particular attention to those who are disadvantaged or at risk – people with disabilities, ethnic or linguistic

minorities, those living in peripheral neighbourhoods, children and young people, etc.

- The availability of libraries, community centres, and other social and cultural facilities, where citizens can exercise their cultural rights in a collective setting, serves to gather, meet, connect with strangers, and, as suggested by Eric Klinenberg, to feel cared for, thus contributing to repair ‘the fractured societies we live in today’ (2018: 11). Advancing in this direction involves, firstly, ensuring that community facilities are accessible and adapted to local needs and, secondly, that adequate mechanisms of mediation and outreach, enabling access and making places comfortable, are fully embedded in their ways of operating.
- Increasingly, cultural programmes guided by values of equality, non-discrimination and care are being connected to strategies of health and wellbeing. Approaches in this field include social prescription programmes that see arts and cultural practices as a prevention in addressing mental health conditions and fostering wellbeing (as in the [ENO Breathe programme](#) developed by the English National Opera and London’s Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, and Dublin’s [AWE – Cultural engagement through accessibility, wellbeing and evidence](#) programme); the availability of cultural opportunities across the city as a way to reduce inequalities in wellbeing (as illustrated by [Malmö’s strategies in culture and sustainability](#)); and the mainstreaming of cultural diversity and an intercultural approach to improve healthcare practices (as in [Qullañ Uta, the traditional medicine information and guidance centres in La Paz](#)).
- Cultural rights include the ability to access the cultural heritage and cultural expressions of others, in addition to our own. When cultural policies and programmes enable a discovery of the stories of others (e.g. by involving migrants in projects to interpret heritage and museum collections, in a decolonial perspective), there is a potential to recognise them and see them as equals – thus, for instance, shifting negative narratives around migration. This can ultimately contribute to developing a more pluralistic, multisided understanding of the past, free from prejudices and to collectively construct the present and the future (Global Taskforce, 2023).
- In a related vein, recognising the cultural rights of others has implications at the international level, including, in particular, favouring international cultural cooperation with cities and communities in the Global South, and broadening their opportunities to make their cultural expressions and

heritage more visible, thus also helping to shift global narratives of inequality. The UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions involves principles of international solidarity and cooperation and of openness and balance, the latter calling governments to promoting openness to other cultures of the world. In this framework, local governments and cultural actors should also implement a preferential treatment towards artists, cultural professionals, and cultural works from the Global South (Baltà Portolés, 2024). In the last few years, several international initiatives fostering fairer practices in global cultural exchanges have been adopted, including the [Fair Culture Charter](#), which places emphasis on balanced exchanges and decent working conditions for culture professionals.

- A consideration of cultural factors and how they enable or prevent the exercise of human rights can be critical in order to foster a transformation of cultural representations, social norms and behaviour. This is illustrated by programmes such as the [Calma Line psychosocial and emotional care service](#) established in Bogotá, which works to promote co-responsible and non-violent masculinities, as a way to prevent gender-based violence and to promote co-responsibility in caring duties.
- More broadly, cultural programmes and facilities can be conducive to revising gender narratives with a feminist perspective, and integrating an intersectional lens. Integrating care in cultural policy involves, for instance, recognising women's stories which have frequently been neglected in the past, and giving them the spaces they deserve in cultural institutions and public space, ultimately contributing to the emergence of new gender narratives. Relevant examples include Montevideo's [cultural policies with a perspective on gender equality](#).
- Cultural rights also include the ability of citizens to engage in consultation and decision-making in cultural affairs. Further to enriching cultural policies and empowering communities, participatory governance has also been found to feel recognised, cared for and gain resilience, as shown in Gwanak-gu, where [youth participation in cultural policymaking](#) has served to address problems including alienation, loneliness and mental health issues. Indeed, by involving people in governance processes, cities also show that they care for them (Shaheed, 2021).

2. Cultural rights involve caring for diverse cultural expressions, legacies and memories

There are other ways in which cultural rights intersect with values and practices of care. Among them is the recognition that, if the right to take part in cultural life and other cultural rights are fundamental aspects in human dignity, a consideration of the wellbeing and aspirations of present and future generations should involve caring for knowledge, heritage assets, and cultural practices and expressions that are valuable to today's generations, and which they believe should be passed on to future generations. This can be closely connected to some of the arguments for considering culture as a pillar of sustainability, as argued by Jon Hawkes (2001) and other authors.

In this respect, it is worth underlining that global agendas still fail to properly acknowledge the distinctive contribution made by cultural rights, cultural knowledge and other cultural factors, such as diversity and heritage, to an understanding of sustainability that combines people, planet and governance. This is one of the core demands of the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, of which UCLG is one of the leading partners, which advocates for the acknowledgement of the importance of culture to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for the establishment of a dedicated, or standalone, goal on culture in the Post-2030 Development Agenda. In 2022, the campaign formulated a proposal for a Culture Goal, which could include targets addressing inclusive access and participation in cultural life, empowering Indigenous peoples, and developing a cultural approach in environmental protection and sustainable urbanisation, among other issues (Culture 2030 Goal campaign, 2022).

There are countless initiatives in which cities and local governments can preserve, safeguard and pass on valuable cultural knowledge, memories and practices. In doing so, a care-based approach should recognise the dynamic, rather than static, nature of cultural practices from the perspective of cultural rights vein – as suggested by the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights in her 2016 report, the focus should be on 'the protection of cultural heritage as being of crucial value for human beings and their cultural identity', rather than on the preservation of cultural heritage per se.

A consideration of how citizens can make their cultural rights effective, including full access to and participation in cultural life, involves considering the settings in which cultural life takes place, with a perspective of care. In this respect, it is important to assess public space in a feminist and gender-based perspective, and to ensure that cultural opportunities existing in public spaces are fully

accessible, safe and comfortable. Gender equitable uses of public space should include, for instance, arranging the availability of childcare to enable participation in events and other activities (Shaheed, 2021).

Finally, introducing care in cultural policies concerned with diverse cultural expressions, memories and other cultural assets should involve considering the health and wellbeing of artists and cultural workers, as well as of care workers in cultural organisations. Furthermore, cultural organisations should also consider to what extent existing working conditions are compatible with care duties, and how certain expectations and time arrangements may have an impact on the employment opportunities and life-work balance of women and other groups. These issues, which have gained attention in recent years, following the COVID-19 pandemic and the acknowledgement of increasing precarious working conditions in this and other economic sectors, should continue to inspire policies in this field.

3. Cultural practices that foster care for the planet

Full recognition of and respect for cultural rights, involving the ability of individuals and communities to actively take part in cultural life as well as the affirmation of a collective environment in which the value of creativity, diversity and heritage is acknowledged, can contribute to enhancing care for nature, the environment and the planet. While steps in this direction need to go hand-in-hand with policies and programmes in other fields, evidence suggests several connections between the exercise of cultural rights and the fostering of care:

- Studies have suggested that people who more regularly take part in cultural activities are also more likely to be aware of their collective duties and engage in environmentally-sustainable behaviour, including recycling – something which seems to result from an awareness of the connection between individual behaviour and long-term social outcomes, which is facilitated by the complexity of stories accessed through the arts (Crocata, Agovino & Sacco, 2015). In this respect, fostering access to cultural life for everyone could have positive effects in environmental awareness and care for the planet.
- Several creative practices, including both traditional and contemporary forms of creativity, are based on recycling and care for materials and resources. Some authors have suggested that at the basis of creative work is an inherent will to ‘maintain, continue, and/or repair our world’ (Wilson,

2018: 634) through self-expression, and that therefore creativity can be understood as a practice of care for the world. In this respect, programmes that enable citizens to develop their creative skills and express themselves can be conducive to expressing care for a better world.

- At the core of such practices of care is an understanding that the planet is inherently valuable and should not be understood merely as a set of resources which may be exploited or taken instrumentally. Traditional practices based on mutuality and reciprocity between nature and humanity (Hage, 2017), the commons' understanding of the world as made up of more than resources (Hine, 2015) and people-centred cultural policies and programmes that escape a narrow focus on economic instrumentality (UCLG, 2015; O'Connor, 2024) illustrate ways in which the exercise of cultural rights can enhance mutuality towards and care for the planet.
- The inclusion of artistic and creative elements in public spaces and green spaces, making them more pleasant and attractive, and the recognition of local diversity and traditional elements in the built and the natural environment as in Greater Dandenong's [The Spirit of Enterprise](#) project), are some of the ways in which cities and local governments can foster an appreciation of the local environment and, in this way, enhance care towards our surroundings.
- Emphasising the specific contribution that cultural rights and participation can make in terms of care for the planet should be complemented with collaboration, partnerships and alliances with other stakeholders involved in fostering a fair and sustainable transition, including social movements, Indigenous groups, women's associations, etc. (Potts, 2021), from which valuable approaches can be learned, and more comprehensive, holistic, intersectional approaches to care can develop.

This paper has presented an initial approximation to how cultural rights, and local and regional policies driven by them, can embody and contribute to enhancing care. A longer paper on culture as an infrastructure for caring cities and regions will be prepared in the coming months, to contribute to the GOLD VII process.

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