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The creative economy and sustainable development

2021 has been designated International Year of Creative Economy and Sustainable Development by the United Nations. In a sense this represents the creative economy 'coming of age'; in 2008 the seminal Creative Economy report was first published by UNCTAD in collaboration with UNDP and members of the UN family. This last 14 years was preceded by at least a similar period of work at the national scale, where many nation states sought to register the sudden growth in importance of the creative economy that had taken place. Of course, these initiatives began first with cities developing innovative and exploratory policy responses to the emergence of the growth in the new creative economy. It was not insignificant that many of these cities were simultaneously experiencing the economic shocks of de-industrialisation.

The creative economy, as its fluid label illustrates, is a fast-changing and shape-shifting phenomenon. It has challenged policy makers who have generally tried and failed to use generic policies to guide its development. However, specific policies have been caught in the bind of appealing to either economic development or social cultural development: patrimony and heritage, or new cultural forms; or instrumentalism at the cost to intrinsic policy objectives. If there is one lesson that we might take away from this period it is that policies and thinking based on the creative economy as self-sufficient of, or isolated from, economy and society is unhelpful. The notion of a creative economy ecosystem has helped to 'rethink' the networks, linkages and interdependencies that characterise it.

This UN year reminds us of both the journey made, but also of the challenges ahead. The focus on sustainable development might seem as if it directs us to the mitigation of further environmental damage, and the forthcoming COP26 climate conference reminds us of the imperatives here. Many will wonder about the impact of culture on the environment, feeling perhaps that it is the least of our worries. However,

closer analysis reveals the production of waste and consumption of raw materials in our new technologies, and anything concerned with fashion; it also affects tourism and travel, and how we go about conserving the built environment, not to mention considering the relationship between indigenous cultures, intangible heritage and the environment. But we should not be caught in another conceptual 'box' concerning culture and sustainability. Arguably, the most important focus is on the sustainability of culture (whilst at the same time not further damaging the environment).

For those concerned with policy, and with cities, this conclusion widens our frame of reference perhaps further than before. The recognition that today's culture is tomorrow's heritage, puts us on a difficult tightrope: balancing the past with present and future. If this were not enough, a further 'clear and present danger' is whether we have institutions and policy ideas that reflect the new cultural ecosystem. Understandably, we inherit institutions and policies, and conceptions of the city, from the past. The challenge is to adapt these to a future that is not like the past, and a cultural economy that is a fast developing and morphing subject. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be thus to our imaginations; to escape from the silo-ed thinking of old disciplines and schools of thought, and policies and institutions, and to embrace a more 'transversal' mode of operation and thinking.

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