

#BeyondTheOutbreak: Cultural Rights During and After the Pandemic

Panel: Imagining the Tomorrow:

Talk: Culture is the Heart of Our Response to Covid-19

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I thank the organizers for this important digital convening and send my sincere cultural solidarity to you all. We mourn so many people, including leading cultural figures lost in every region to COVID-19, from Chinese film director Chang Kai to Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango and beyond. We must remember them all, draw strength from the works they bequeath us and honor their memories by supporting artists and continuing to promote a nourishing cultural life for everyone. Culture is the heart of our response to COVID-19.

It is challenging to be asked to imagine tomorrow (and in 5 minutes) when today itself is difficult to imagine. We must consider, in the words of Canadian artist Amanda Parris, “what kind of new world... we want to build.”¹ Her response, which I second, was that “Part of the answer lies in reflecting on what we don't want to continue. I suggest, she said, that in this new iteration, we stop devaluing artists' worth.”²

Building this new world requires a *cultural rights* perspective both to the question of how we survive this difficult today, and how we imagine a better tomorrow. The rights of everyone to take part in cultural life without discrimination, to freedom of artistic expression, and to benefit

¹ Amanda Parris, *Artists are getting us through COVID-19. Never question their value again*, CBC Arts, 3 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/artists-are-getting-us-through-covid-19-never-question-their-value-again-1.5519840>

² *Id.*

from scientific progress are guaranteed by international law. Everyone has a right to participate in and be consulted about policies to ensure these rights. All of this remains true. Equally important, we must remember that some limitations to human rights, including cultural rights, are included in international law. I support stay at home orders and social distancing, while recognizing that the hardships they cause must also be addressed. I unequivocally oppose attempts to use human rights or cultural rights arguments to try to subvert these public health efforts inappropriately by for example organizing public religious gatherings or public protests against social distancing in ways that put others at risk.

Clearly, the re-imagining of tomorrow from a cultural rights perspective should be envisaged across several time frames. In the short term, we must work with urgency to guarantee financial support for artists, cultural practitioners, cultural rights defenders and cultural institutions. The centrality of culture as a coping mechanism in these times offers us a vital advocacy tool in this regard. As the writer Stephen King tweeted: “If you think artists are useless, try to spend your quarantine without music, books, poems, movies and paintings.”³³ We need nothing less than a global cultural plan to keep alive the cultural life which helps keep us alive. It should be locally driven, and globally supported and coordinated.

In the short and medium term we must continue to reconfigure public cultural life, including in digital spaces, with wonderful initiatives such as artists remotely painting portraits of health care workers, “at home” concerts, virtual tours of museums and heritage sites continuing and multiplying with offerings for different generations, language groups and all sectors of society, including persons with disabilities. Human rights guarantees apply online and

³³ @StephenKing, 3 April 2020, <https://twitter.com/StephenKing/status/1246098663174266882?s=20>.

public powers need to ensure access to and participation in cyberspace for all.⁴ We must confront the digital divide, and find other safe ways to re-imagine cultural life and build connection in conformity with public health (such as popular balcony music jams in Sicily or singalongs from rooftops and windows in New York). This is a time in which we struggle with many challenges but also explore new possibilities and new cultural forms. Essential human rights commitments to non-discrimination and inclusion of diverse voices must be maintained even in the face of crushing budget cuts. And I hope we continue to support at-risk cultural rights defenders, such as cultural activist Osman Kavala who remains in prison in Turkey now.

From the medium to the longer term, we will also be watching for safer times when public cultural life and shared use of public spaces will become possible again. We must commit to supporting that renaissance, emphasizing that as important as digital cultural life may be it is a complement not an alternative to a shared public cultural life when that becomes safe again. Such efforts must be driven by public health expertise. We need to build connections with relevant scientific experts who can advise us.

Whatever the time frame, we must not give up on the dream of a better tomorrow based on new construction, not just re-construction, in which we consider, for example, greater gender inclusion and more climate friendly ways to do our work in future. (My next report for the UN General assembly focuses on climate change, culture and cultural rights. Please consider making a submission.⁵)

As grave as the challenges are, I end with a spirit of optimism. Optimism is not false hope. It is not about denying reality. As an Afghan woman I interviewed who was in a terrible security

⁴ UN Doc A/74/255, para. 70, citing Human Rights Council resolution 20/8.

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CulturalRights/Pages/CallForInputClimateChange.aspx>.

situation once said to me, “Optimism is key to survival.” Let us together use culture and cultural rights to foster optimism that recognizes the gravity of today but also says, “tomorrow, together, with our cultures to sustain us, in solidarity, we shall prevail.”