The role of culture in preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion

Ensuring effective access to and participation in cultural activities for all is an essential dimension of promoting an inclusive society. Furthermore, participation in cultural activities can also be instrumental in helping people and communities to overcome poverty and social exclusion. The issue of access to culture is thus a very important one for the European Union's social inclusion process and in particular for Member States in developing their National Action Plans on poverty and social exclusion (NAPs/inclusion).

The importance of this issue led to the commissioning of a study by the Centre for Public Policy at Northumbria University. This is a summary of the main findings of this study. The study analyses and identifies cultural policies and programmes that contribute to preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion. Policies in eight Member States are examined in the study (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) and an overview of policies in five new Member States is also included.

Access to culture can increase social inclusion

There are many different ways in which access to and participation in cultural activities can be very important in promoting greater social inclusion: These include:

- *Building skills and self-confidence:* Participation of young people in drama and theatre workshops can enhance their confidence and develop team-working and interpersonal skills and other generic transferable skills. They can encourage young people disaffected by formal education and training to seek employment or additional training in the performing arts sector.

- *Enhancing self-esteem and identity:* Projects promoting involvement in cultural activities can lead to greater self-confidence and higher self-esteem, lead to increased participation in society and in the labour market and consolidate a positive sense of identity for many groups at risk of exclusion such as disadvantaged young people, disabled people and minority ethnic groups.

- *Overcoming cultural diversity and discrimination:* The integration of immigrants can be promoted through language classes or the use of drama or dance in schools to celebrate different cultures.

- *Creating employment opportunities:* Some local projects, such as drama workshops (France), training in digital media (UK) and the creation of rap music centres (Germany), specifically aim to encourage employment in the creative industries.

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- *Increasing access to information and services:* Projects, often in libraries (Italy), extend access to the Internet for disadvantaged groups.

- *Promoting social integration:* Local history groups (Denmark) can provide opportunities for elderly people to meet to reduce their risk of social exclusion.

Build on existing good practice

There is an immense richness and diversity of cultural activity at local level which contributes to greater social inclusion across the Union. Indeed, practice in the field is often well ahead of policy and coordination at national or international level. Furthermore, at local and regional level there is more awareness and appreciation than at the national or international levels of what is happening on the ground and better support in consequence. However, there are a number of Member States (France, UK, Finland, the Czech Republic and Sweden) that have national policies to support the linking of access to culture with inclusion strategies and provide examples of good practice in terms of establishing a clear link between cultural and social exclusion. The fact that a multi-dimensional understanding of social exclusion is accepted is reflected in the widespread recognition at local level that inclusion in cultural activities is often an important stepping stone preventing or addressing social exclusion.

- All countries could point to specific projects at local level that brought the social inclusion and cultural policy agendas together.

- There were many examples of local agencies working together to address the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion. This led to a combination of programmes being available that included social protection measures and access to health care and housing as well as encouraging participation in local cultural projects, sports activities and education, training and employment. Germany's Social City programme and the United Kingdom's urban renewal programme provided good examples of this.

- Urban and rural regeneration programmes were often the vehicle for bringing local agencies together to tackle social exclusion and these are often stimulated by EU Structural Funds.

- A number of countries were developing initiatives to encourage the take-up of increased employment opportunities in the creative industries and the tourism sector. European funding programmes such as ESF were frequently imaginatively used to support increased training opportunities.

- Local agencies in all countries were aware of the importance of culture as a means of building personal confidence, consolidating identity, preventing social exclusion and providing routes for a number of people into employment in both the creative industries and other sectors.

- All countries included in the study were extending access to the Internet and were using libraries and other local community venues to provide access to ICT facilities. This was often particularly important for elderly people who were less likely than others to have access to a computer or the Internet at home, as well as a lack of technical competence to deal with new technology.

- In some countries a great deal of emphasis is placed on providing language tuition for immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers to facilitate integration into the host country. Whilst this is necessary to help counteract exclusion, it is also necessary to develop programmes that encourage cultural diversity to flourish.

Barriers to accessing and participating in cultural activity

Three types of groups are perceived to be most at risk of cultural exclusion: first, those who are economically disadvantaged and lack the financial or social means to access cultural activities (in particular the long-term and young unemployed, the disadvantaged elderly and poor families); secondly, refugees and immigrants; and, thirdly, disabled people. The report identifies a number of barriers that prevent groups such as these from accessing cultural services and opportunities and expressing their own cultural identity. These include:

- A lack of knowledge of the existence of services arising from a lack of information or being outside the social networks that would provide relevant information;

- Where a charge is incurred, for example in museums or at sports clubs, socially excluded people may not be able to access those services;

- A preoccupation with survival on a day-to-day basis can result in little time or energy being available to access and participate in cultural services and activities;

- Geographical disparities in the provision of services means that only those living in certain areas have access to a range of local cultural services and opportunities – in rural areas in particular the cost of transport can be a problem;

- Disabled people face a range of barriers from the lack of physical access to the lack of specific support for visual, aural or other impairments;

- Minority ethnic communities face a lack of cultural services to support their native culture and few support mechanisms to enable them to effectively participate in the host culture. An additional barrier in this respect may be a reluctance to participate in activities outside those of the native culture because of fear, intimidation, lack of interest or lack of experience with some cultural services and opportunities;

- A lack of support and services and opportunities that cater for sub-cultures or countercultures is most likely to create access barriers for young people;

- A lack of services for marginalised groups such as ex-offenders, drug misusers and so on.

Barriers to policy development

The NAPs/inclusion give very limited coverage to the links between poverty and social exclusion and in general do not mention groups at particular risk of cultural exclusion. This is not surprising as in several countries there were no cohesive programmes at national level aimed at linking social inclusion with culture. In most Member States, the government has not managed to integrate cultural policy effectively into its social exclusion and anti-poverty agenda. The report identifies a number of common barriers that need

to be overcome to develop effective policies in this area. These include:

- A lack of recognition at national policy level of the importance of access to culture services and opportunities as a means of reducing exclusion and therefore a lack of programmes to support it.

- A shortage of funding to provide cultural services that are accessible to all.

- A lack of systematic connection and coherent policy between Ministries at national levels.

- A lack or under-representation of human and social capital dimensions in cultural policy and priorities, particularly at the national level. In any case, 'culture' - despite its importance in national identity and the growing recognition of its role as an economic driver - is frequently a relatively low political priority and the policies of the Ministries of Culture still tend to start out from the twin agendas of cultural (and heritage) institutions and their attendant financial problems.

- At both national and local levels, the concept of social exclusion tends to be related primarily to employment and related socio-economic factors, thus limiting the attention given to cultural policies. Nevertheless, there are clear signs of growing awareness of the broader possibilities in a number of countries and the development of policies that promote a positive role for culture in social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal by improving the 'performance' of communities.

- Most 'high-level' cultural policies are primarily directed at existing institutions such as protecting heritage, art galleries, the performing arts, libraries, museums and the general population rather than being targeted at particular sections, although the tradition in the Nordic countries has on the whole been more inclusive with regard to social provision and participation.

- Limited funding and short-term initiatives act as barriers to mainstream consideration of the role culture can play in tackling social exclusion.

- In a situation of reduced funding for public services, funding for cultural policies is often not a high priority.

- Crude monitoring programmes that concentrate on visitor or user numbers may only disguise the lack of access to cultural services and activities by those who are particularly disadvantaged. This may also have the effect of misdirecting funds from projects that seek to work with excluded groups to support the achievement of national participation targets.

- A lack of understanding of cultural diversity and ways to support this can present a further barrier for those from minority cultures. In many countries, more emphasis needs to be placed on ways of embracing cultural diversity to facilitate integration, other than language tuition. The underlying approach varies enormously within the EU.

- While there is a huge range of initiatives in existence, these are often unknown outside the geographical area in which they are operating and there are few opportunities for the sharing of good practice or for broadly similar projects to be compared. This sometimes reflects a lack of drive at central government levels to actively

promote engagement in cultural activities as an important tool for addressing social exclusion.

• Recognition of the role that culture can play in attacking social exclusion is being undermined by a lack of quantifiable evidence and the lack of indicators to measure the impact of the participation in cultural activities on social exclusion.

The Importance of European funding

A key outcome of the research is the identification of the important role that European programmes and funding streams play in supporting local or regional initiatives that bring culture and social inclusion agendas together. However, few programmes are primarily devoted to developing links between culture and social inclusion and directly supporting this policy agenda. Indeed, funding and support for culture and social inclusion is often an indirect by-product of projects and programmes designed to address other priorities.

Mix of policy approaches needed

In order to develop the mix of cultural policies and programmes that are necessary to increase equality of access and remove barriers to participation in cultural activities, it is necessary for departments and ministries responsible for both cultural and social policy to produce strong policy statements that encourage the participation of all groups in cultural activities and projects. Budgets should be clearly earmarked for this purpose.

From the projects identified in the different countries studied, a range of different policy approaches that would be necessary to develop a comprehensive approach are evident. These include:

• *Promoting wider access to national heritage sites and buildings and to cultural services (particularly to theatre, museums and opera).*

For instance, some countries have responded to this, at least partially, by making access to cultural services such as museums free (UK and Sweden). Others have reduced prices for those who were elderly, young or in receipt of state benefits. This is sometimes combined with marketing campaigns about cultural services with special efforts to reach disabled people, people from ethnic minority communities and low income groups and a recognition that people from disadvantaged communities are not able to engage in cultural activities in their local area. This could be because none or few existed, there was lack of knowledge about their existence and/or these people had no previous experience of participating in cultural projects. Hence there are many examples (e.g. in France, Italy, Sweden, UK and Germany) of cultural projects being supported as part of regeneration initiatives that were targeted at specific localities.

- *Supporting participation in community based cultural activities.*
  These can cover projects that:
- Celebrate the cultural diversity and improve understanding and tolerance towards different cultures (Finland, UK and Sweden) and encourage participation from minority ethnic groups so as to enhance their integration in mainstream society;

- Increase access of disabled people to cultural services and activities and to projects which train disabled people for employment in the creative industry sector (Sweden and Finland);

- Use cultural activities to reach out to hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups (Germany, UK and the Netherlands) and to address social problems such as alcoholism, crime and drug addiction (Czech Republic).

- *Supporting projects that seek to widen employment opportunities in the culture or creative industry sectors.*
  Local agencies in all countries studied recognise the role that culture can play in building personal confidence and providing routes into employment in both the creative industries and other sectors for a number of people.

- *Supporting and developing cultural activities in schools.*
  Education policies should encourage participation in mediums such as literature, music, drama and dance which increase self-confidence and self-esteem and which can be a means for young people to celebrate their cultural heritage and learn about different cultures.

- *Providing wider access to the Internet and library use.*
  All countries studied were extending access to the Internet and were using libraries and other local community venues to provide access to ICT facilities. This is often particularly important for elderly people.

- *Helping refugees or immigrants maintain their native culture and participate in cultural activities in their host country to increase their integration.*
  All countries see the acquisition of language and other social skills by immigrant groups as a necessary prerequisite for securing a job and participating in the life of their community, thus preventing the social exclusion of these groups, often alongside classes that give information about the culture of the host country. Such projects also often seek to promote tolerance, respect and an understanding of minority communities.

- *Involving disabled people in cultural activities.*
  This is seen as important for their integration in mainstream society. There are also projects (Sweden and Finland) which train disabled people for employment in the creative industry sector.

Recommendations

1. National policies including National Action Plans for inclusion need to address the role that cultural policy and practices play in addressing the needs of people who are socially excluded.

2. Stakeholders and groups contributing to the NAPs inclusion could be asked their views about the importance of participation in cultural activities as a means of reducing social exclusion.

3. Consideration needs to be given to mainstreaming support for cultural activities where they are able to demonstrate that they have a positive impact on reducing social exclusion.

4. Greater effort needs to be made to align the agendas of ministries responsible for culture with those that are responsible for social inclusion so that policies that recognise and value the contribution access to cultural services and activities can have in tackling social exclusion can be developed and implemented.

5. Culture needs to be broadly defined; it goes further than the remit of cultural policy (the arts, sports, media, theatre, museums, libraries) to embrace opportunities that enhance the quality of life for everyone and provide access routes out of marginalisation and unemployment.

6. Education polices should provide an important mechanism for celebrating a variety of cultures and introducing children and young people to a range of cultural services and activities.

7. Further information about the role culture can play in reducing social exclusion and the support that is provided by the European Commission could be gathered from a sample audit of the current European funding programmes outlined in Section Four of this report.

8. Where European funding is used (such as URBAN, ESF, GRUNDTVIG) to support cultural projects, the piloting of indicators to measure the impact of the participation in cultural activities on social exclusion should take place.

Further information:

A copy of the full report, including a detailed description and analysis of the policies in each of the eight Member States and five new Member States, can be found on the EU's social inclusion web site at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_inclusion/studies_en.htm

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