**Local and Regional Governments Day on   
Accelerating transformation from the ground-up   
in a post-Covid era**

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**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 in these difficult times. We mourn so many people, including leading cultural figures lost in every region to COVID-19. We must honor their memories by 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 a post-COVID era when the hope of getting beyond the pandemic sometimes seems remote. However, it is clear that going forward 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, and to artistic and scientific freedoms, are guaranteed by international law. Everyone has a right to participate in and be consulted about policies to ensure these rights. All this remains true.

Even in these trying times, when more than half a million people have died from the virus, cultural rights are not a luxury. They are key to the overall implementation of universal human rights and a crucial part of the responses to many current challenges, from discrimination and poverty to COVID-19 itself. Moreover, the safeguarding and promotion of culture contributes directly to many of the Sustainable Development Goals – safe and sustainable cities, the promotion of gender equality, and peaceful and inclusive societies.

Transformation in a post-COVID era 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 and cultural institutions. The centrality of culture as a coping mechanism in these times offers us a vital advocacy tool. Faced with the grave difficulties of the pandemic, we must remember, as the 2020 Rome Charter says, that culture sometimes is the solution, and sometimes can help us to find other solutions.[[1]](#footnote-1) I also appreciate the Charter’s emphasis on sharing cultures and creativity so as to strengthen social and democratic life. One of the things we need the most now as human beings is to find safe ways to share and connect, and culture offers this. Taken together, all this means 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 safely reconfigure public cultural life, including in digital spaces, with offerings for all sectors of society, including persons with disabilities. Human rights guarantees apply online and public powers need to ensure access to cyberspace for all. 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 around the world, 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 more public cultural life and greater 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, of course, be shaped by public health expertise.

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, more climate friendly ways to do our work in future. (On this point, let me mention that my next report for the UN General Assembly focuses on climate change and cultural rights.)

One of the cultural values we must emphasize going forward is solidarity which is critical to pandemic responses. This is a moment to emphasize provisions such as article 15(4) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which recognizes the importance of transnational cooperation in achieving cultural rights, including the right to benefit from scientific progress, which is essential for securing the right to health.

As grave as the challenges are, I end with a spirt of optimism. Optimism is not about denying reality. As an Afghan woman once said to me, “Optimism is key to survival.” Let us together use culture and cultural rights to foster hope that recognizes the gravity of today but also says, “tomorrow, together, as we plan for 2030, in our cities and beyond, with our cultures and cultural rights to sustain us, with the SDGs as our guides, we shall prevail.”

Thank you.

1. See www.2020romecharter.org/charter/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)