



Unlocking the transformative potential of culture and the arts
Innovative practices and policies from social enterprises and third sector organizations active in the cultural sector

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Building support to the local cultural ecosystem: Are information, knowledge and strategic thinking means to empower private and public cultural actors?

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Historical background

Multilateral is an association created in 1998 which consists of professionals with wide-ranging experience in cultural management. It was conceived to approach the cultural sector from a perspective that promotes sustainable management of culture through cooperation.

This organizational form was selected because it is a form of cooperation and it allows for sharing ideas, resources and creating programs to work on a specific mission.

Mission

To encourage international cultural cooperation via intergovernmental mechanisms and independent networks, studying and evaluating regional cultural projects, and designing and supporting the launch of innovative cultural and artistic projects.

Objectives

1. To claim the cultural dimension as a key element of any regional development policy.
2. To support artists and cultural professionals through information, knowledge, training, counseling and mentoring.
3. To enable cultural research among cultural actors through the documentation center.
4. To raise awareness on the importance of cooperating in cultural management and the advantages and opportunities offered by the internationalization of cultural projects.
5. To help emerging artist and cultural actors to professionalize their artistic and cultural practices.
6. To formulate and implement projects that aim at active citizenship, critical thinking and the increase of cultural participation.

Main current activities

There are a variety of projects in which Multilateral is currently working on but this case study will bring into focus **Zaragoza Cultura Acompaña (ZCA)**.

ZCA is an initiative that gives professional support to artists and cultural actors at a local level in Zaragoza. It belongs to Zaragoza Cultural (ZC), a public enterprise of Zaragoza City Council, but Multilateral is the organization responsible of the management and who provides

the professional support.

The cultural sector demanded the creation of ZCA. Actually, it was a proposition that emerged from the Zaragoza Culture Council (ZCC)¹. This proposition was based on the existence of Infoculture, a project devised by Multilateral in 2002. Infoculture aimed to offer informative support and guidance to cultural actors to facilitate the improvement of their skills and in consequence, achieve the professionalization of their activities.

ZC took into consideration the ZCC's proposition previously mentioned, and launched a call for tender to set up an information, documentation, advice, and support service for artist and cultural professionals. Multilateral won the tendering process and began working in November 2017. The proposal posed by Multilateral was underpinned by the experience gained from Infoculture. Nevertheless, to configure ZCA and replicate Infoculture in Zaragoza it was necessary to adapt the methodology to the opportunities and challenges cultural actors tackle in 2017, key issues and actual trends in cultural policies, and last but not least features of the cultural sector in Zaragoza. Therefore, a key element of the proposal was what we named a "prospect report".

It is necessary to highlight that this prospect process was not tackled as an academic research and it was a mean to gather some information.

The work related to the "prospect report" was organized into four phases:

Phase 1: Reviewing policy debates and Culturalbase² findings and conclusions in relation to the cultural creativity axis³.

Phase 2: Consulting with cultural actors in Zaragoza. To gather information two different means were used: an online survey and interviews.

Phase 3: Conceptualize ZCA and define the work methodology.

Phase 4: Identify stakeholders and complementary organizations who could become potential partners in the future to create synergies and develop possible collaborations.

The prospect report achieved five objectives:

1. To dialogue with cultural ecosystem actors and start practicing the active listening of the sector.
2. To identify opportunities for cultural actors in Zaragoza in the current political and financial framework.
3. To detect the challenges and needs that the cultural sector based in Zaragoza has to face.
4. To understand what are the interrelations and dynamics of the cultural sector in Zaragoza.
5. To approach potential users and communicate the startup of the project.

Active listening and dialogue with cultural actors were key aspects on the conceptualization. Cultural actors consulted along the prospect process were those that took part in the participative process of Zaragoza's candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2016, and/or those that have applied for ZC calls for funding cultural activities.

As a result of the prospect process Multilateral identified a variety of challenges to address through ZCA:

¹ The Zaragoza Culture Council (ZCC) is configured as the main organ of citizen participation, debate, monitoring, evaluation and accountability on the cultural policies designed for the City.

² Culturalbase is a social platform on Cultural Heritage and European Identities funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 framework <https://culturalbase.eu/>

³ The key issues and challenges CulturalBase identified around the creativity axis were related to the question about "how can culture be a basis for citizen expression, participation, and economic activity".

1. The little opportunities emerging cultural actors have to professionalize their activities.
2. Young artists and young cultural workers do not connect with Zaragoza Cultural.
3. Cultural actors do not access to cultural information.
4. Cultural actors have difficulties understanding cultural policies and funding calls.
5. There is no support system for cultural management.
6. At a local level there is no trigger to enable collaboration and cooperation among cultural actors, public administrations and the different cultural venues of the city.
7. Cultural actors and cultural organizations do not take part in mobility opportunities.
8. Low cultural participation and lack of connection between cultural actors and their communities.
9. High dependence on public funding specially on the local public funding.
10. Weak business structures, almost no experience in financing diversification and with participation in cultural cooperation projects.
11. The percentage of women who develop their cultural projects on a professional way is lower than the masculine percentage.

Besides, some other issues drew our attention throughout the process. Mainly, these issues emerged from the dialogue with artist and cultural organizations, and in many cases were reflections regarding their professional itinerary and their everyday professional activity. Issues above mentioned are:

- The artistic rationality does not coincide with the policy-makers rationality or with the economic rationality. The different actors who coexist in the cultural ecosystem approach the same issues from different perspectives and their interaction is not always easy.
- A sustainable management of culture needs political stability and a new model of governance funded on evidence-based decision making. The use of evidence to inform decisions is necessary for good policymaking, program and project design but a high rate of policy-makers, artist and cultural workers do not consider this as a necessary issue, do not identify the means to access to this information and/or have difficulties to understand and uptake this kind of knowledge.
- Nowadays, precariousness and cultural work are almost synonyms. Cultural actors often have unpredictable income and combine several jobs to earn a living. At the same time, most of new models of governance in culture are based on participation processes. Participation takes time, knowledge and effort. Nevertheless, many cultural actors lack of time and resources to get involved in these processes or/and are disappointed with previous participatory experiences in which got involved.
- The cultural actors consulted imagined ZCA using words such as facilitator, translator or mentor:
 - Facilitator of the dialog, collaborations and connections among different actors at the cultural ecosystem.
 - Translator of funding calls, cultural policies, research findings...
 - Mentor who guide and support strategic thinking and the development of knowledge, abilities and talent.

Legal form and legal status

ZCA activity is based on a public citizen partnership where management corresponds to Multilateral, a non-profit organization which was selected through a tendering process launched by ZC who owns and finances the initiative.

Mode of governance, stakeholders and forms of participation

The relationship among ZC and Multilateral is underpinned on the conditions set forth in the tender call and Multilateral's bid. One of these conditions refers to the obligation of periodic reporting. Multilateral reports on the impacts and results ZCA is achieving. In addition, to assure the proper functioning of ZCA there is a continuous dialog among Multilateral and the Unit of Cultural Planning, Management and Cooperation.

Resources structure

ZCA started working on supporting cultural actors in 4th April 2018, and since then ZCA has been testing its working methodology. ZCA depends on ZC which provides resources (not the staff) and still has to decide if ZCA continues its path.

Economic and financial sustainability

ZCA has been conceived to give support to cultural local actors. At this moment, it presents a multi-side business model in which the revenue does not come from the direct beneficiaries and it is ZC who pays Multilateral for providing the service to artist and cultural workers.

According to Rodriguez (2016) and as a consequence of the multi-side business model, in ZCA the traditional customer unit is divided into two segments: beneficiaries and funder. Multilateral provides a tailor-made assistance to ZCA beneficiaries, but is this value proposition enough to guarantee the survival of ZCA?

The main challenge of sustainability for ZCA depends on the kind of value proposition that offers to the variety of actors who take part in the multi-side business model above-mentioned. In this case, ZCA should take into account all the actors who coexist in the cultural ecosystem, including ZC. Shaping a value proposition is about analyzing, understanding and answering needs.

Can the translator and facilitator role in the local cultural ecosystem be the value proposition ZCA may offer to ZC? Are the knowledge-brokering and the gathering of evidence for decision making the unresolved needs ZCA may contribute to satisfy?

Main connections with the social and solidarity economy and the cultural or arts sectors

For a long time, the dominant approach to understand culture was based on a traditionalist economist narrative. Nevertheless, this dynamic became dysfunctional as it has shown a number of limitations (Culturalbase Consortium, 2017:19), which "are not resolved by divorcing cultural practice from the economy but finding a vision of the economy that suits culture" (Culturalbase Consortium, 2017:29)

ZCA proposes a different approach to culture, a holistic approach based on the concept of the culture cycle⁴ (De Voldere et al, 2017:35-36) and on the assumption that cultural organizations are mission-driven organizations.

Sustainability and the fulfilment of an artistic and/or social mission fit. To survive "cultural organizations need to balance the generation of value with their mission" (Rodríguez, 2016:3). Consequently, the approach proposed by ZCA to support cultural organizations

⁴ Concept developed by UNESCO in 2009 to capture the process of value creation in culture.

emphasizes their mission, their value proposition, the connection with their communities, interrelations at the cultural ecosystem, cross sector fertilization, and the activities and resources that according to cultural value chains are required to transform ideas into sustainable projects.

Transformative potential statement

The cultural ecosystem is a complex environment which consist of a wide range of actors which interaction is not always easy, as they approach the same issues from different perspectives. Therefore, cultural ecosystem needs facilitators who bring people together, facilitate communication and the exchange of know-how, enable innovation and generate synergies.

As facilitator ZCA adopts a developmental and empowering approach based on strategic thinking, mentoring, evidence decision making and the need of making knowledge transfer more effective.

References

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