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Covid-19 and the African cultural economy: an opportunity to reimagine and reinvigorate?

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ABSTRACT
This article takes a summary look at Africa as a whole to ask how has the Covid-19 pandemic played out in the context of a continent that, in the last decade, has considered culture as a key aspect of its modernisation and development. While drawing from a number of national examples, much of the focus is placed here on South Africa which has the most robust system of governance for culture and strongest support for the cultural industries. Where has the C-19 crisis left South Africa and what policy responses are in evidence, and how do these compare with other African nations? The paper reflects on the opportunities C-19 has provided to steer the course of the African cultural economy and offers a set of recommendations for public authorities to consider in supporting a just transition for an inclusive and transformed cultural economy on the African continent.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19; African cultural economy; precarity; relief; stimulus; informality

Introduction

Before the pandemic, cultural and creative industries (CCIs) in Africa were receiving massive media attention enthusiastically labelled as the "new gold" that will lift the continent out of poverty and unemployment. UN agencies referred to the developmental potential of Africa's CCIs in their reports such as UNCTAD's Creative Economy Report (2008), despite their claim that Africa's global share of creative industries contributed <1% to the world's $624bn trade in creative goods. UNESCO's (2013) Creative Economy Report in contrast provided evidence of local cultural expressions widening development pathways. The core message though of both UNESCO and UNCTAD's focus in Africa has looked to culture as a key aspect of its modernisation and development.

There was always going to be a question mark about the ability of African governments to protect and support the creative sector during C-19, both because their general readiness for the pandemic was so constrained by financial resources, poor health systems, infrastructure and governance challenges, and because the arts and the CCIs, despite the media enthusiasm, actually receive very little government support apart from in South Africa.

The pandemic has highlighted the very narrow "entertainment" interpretation African governments have of the cultural economy, seeing it as one that "solely relies on

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communal gatherings and social close interactions as the DNA of its business model" (Wabwire, 2020, p. 3). C-19 has made visible what many suspected: the extreme precarity of cultural workers, the insufficient support from governments for what is essentially a kind of public value (providing many with joy, hope and community solidarity), and the emergent and fragile nature of Africa's CCIs, whether in South Africa or other African countries.

In this paper (written in the midst of the pandemic), I will briefly provide some understanding of how C-19 has affected this cultural economy. The methodology used included assessing early-stage surveys of relief provided by governments (Uganda, South Africa, Kenya), active monitoring of research from and media reports about the sector (government and civil society), monitoring of UNESCO's C-19 response page, discussions during the UNESCO ResiliART debates[1] as well as a small survey I administered to leading cultural experts across the continent. The paper shows how C-19 has provided an opportunity to think anew about what public sector support should include. I will conclude with a set of recommendations for public authorities across the continent to consider in supporting a just transition for an inclusive and transformed cultural economy on the African continent.

C-19's impact on Africa's cultural economy

There is no doubt that the global pandemic and the economic restrictions have been harshly felt by the African cultural economy. The immediate cancellation or postponement of productions, events, exhibitions, festivals and concerts, the closure of theatres, museums, studios and the restrictions on economic activity across the continent has affected artists, cultural workers and professionals in each CCI subsector – as it has the entire gig economy – as government attempted to curb the spread of the virus. As a result, the entire value chain of the cultural economy came to an almost complete halt, locally and internationally.

Very few African countries have complete CCI value chains (creation, production, distribution, exhibition to consumption and audience engagement) with most missing relevant arts education, good distribution networks, as well as cultural infrastructure and technology for all artistic forms. For instance, there is only one cinema per million of people on the continent (Iwuoha, 2013). There is a dominance of small and micro enterprises in the CCI sector with precarious labour conditions unsupported by social protection, with the bulk of activity taking place in the informal economy (Heva Fund, 2020; Joffe, 2013, 2019) with a recent study quantifying this predominance as 53.3% in Senegal, 51.7% in Namibia, 80% in Kenya and 35% in South Africa (Buse, 2020). The African cultural economy had been forced to become hugely resilient and self-sustaining, even in South Africa where the systems and governance and funding are fairly sophisticated, comprehensive and well established (Joffe et al., 2019).

Employment in Africa's cultural goods sector is estimated at half a million people, generating $4.2billion in revenue on the continent (Hruby & Hanan, 2020). The cultural economy is disproportionately active in the urban economies of Africa where financial, logistical and infrastructural services are within reach. This increasing visibility of the cultural economy in cities across Africa is "emblematic of the African renaissance – characterised by the growth of per capita and household incomes, aggressive transformation of urban spaces, rapid adoption of digital communication, growing diaspora remittances and increased foreign direct investment" (Gachara, 2020). And yet, despite African cities generating more than half the continent's total GDP, only a few city governments (Cape Town, Accra, Nairobi, Dakar) have integrated culture and the CCIs into the lifeblood of city making (Joffe, 2019).

While infections and deaths from C-19 on the African continent emerged much later than that witnessed in China, Europe or the US, the impact, particularly on the continent's three largest economies – Nigeria, South Africa and Angola, has been severe. The context of persistently weak growth and investment with declining commodity prices means the entire African continent faces a bleak future with many of the faultlines present in the continent at risk of worsening. An analysis of the impact of C-19 on the African continent by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation predicts it will "widen inequalities within and between countries, worsen already existing fragilities, restrict employment and investment prospects, and potentially fuel additional domestic unrest and conflicts" (2020, p. 6).

The fact that Africa is demographically the world's youngest continent (three-quarters of the population is under the age of 35) does not translate into less infections or deaths (Business Day, 2020). The impact of C-19 has hit the most vulnerable particularly hard, exacerbating the trend of poor employment growth with a huge drop of income experienced by informal workers, estimated at 81% in the first month of the crisis by the World Economic Forum; "in Africa, 85.8% of employment, and 95% of youth employment, is informal" (Munyati, 2020).

All cultural sectors were hugely impacted so that "most individuals and companies (87%) need some form of relief funding to survive" (MIAF, 2020). It was sobering for artists and cultural workers to realise that few had any cushioning or safety net with no plan B for how to generate income outside of these gigs. C-19 did more than bring regular income streams to a complete standstill; it has made visible the fragility of cultural work and project-based income generation in Africa's CCIs. The very resilience that artists and cultural workers were lauded for, their ability to hustle for work from project to project, was shown to be a myth; in effect, it has been the only way for artists and cultural workers to survive in an emergent industry that has insufficient public support or funding, where there is an absence of any social safety net and where written contracts are negligible. As was pointed out in Uganda, most artists and cultural workers "have little or no savings, relying on regular gigs to cover their living costs" (Wabwire, 2020, p. 5). In this context, returning to business as usual for the cultural economy would be a mistake. Rather, as O'Connor suggests, we need to reverse "the accelerating precarity of the cultural sector – AKA 'resilience'" (2020, p. 4).

The pandemic brought the hype of the African cultural economy into question with signs of distress almost immediate. The cultural economy is extremely vulnerable to the lack of buoyancy in the general economy such that "the virus has helped amplify some long-instituted feelings of precariousness as well as the inscribed social tendency to sacrifice labour to the prevailing demands of economic priority" (Banks, 2020, p. 3). It was not surprising that immediate relief was needed for artists and cultural workers throughout the value chain.

Three early surveys highlighted the cultural economy's fragility. The South African Cultural Observatory (SACO) found that 95% of the 595 responses reported cancellation or indefinite postponement of work in the months of April and May with only 21% of employers continuing to pay normal salaries and 29% opting to end the short-term employment contracts of employees. A further 25.5% reduced the salaries of their employees during the lockdown (SACO, 2020). The Heva Fund in Kenya reported that 97% of the respondents were directly affected by the pandemic with a majority (76%) registering instances of financial loss. Indicative of the gender inequities the survey highlighted the additional burden of care on women leaving “less resources available for their entrepreneurial activities”. KG Hub Africa in Uganda found that the arts industry and artists collectively lost over 500 million Ugandan shillings from the cancellation of over 300 events which in turn affected over 80% of the artists and arts organisations who “rely on these community events for a large proportion of their income to supplement their freelance earnings and sustain their livelihoods”. Relevant to the continent as a whole, it highlighted impacts vital to sustaining livelihoods such as “rising mental health concerns, financial security and community connectedness” (Wabwire, 2020, pp. 3–6).

Government relief for artists and cultural workers

Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Zimbabwe were among the few African countries which offered emergency artist relief (UNESCO, 2020). Reports from a small survey with African cultural experts reveal somewhat of a mixed response to the relief but, for some, the first-ever targeted funding for the sector.

Kenya (6th April) announced direct government support from the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage in the form of emergency relief of Ksh.100 M for their artist relief fund (US$944,287). However, this was only for artists, actors and musicians to continue to entertain through TV, radio and the Internet. The fund was the result of a collaboration between Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs, Kenya Copyright Board and Collective Management Organizations which set up a centralised payment system (UNESCO, 2020). Many Kenyan artists and cultural professionals point out that the package of support was seen as an unprecedented move, especially because the creative sector is always in the shadows or typically not treated as priority; however, as explained by Dr Mshai Mwangolo in one of Kenya’s UNESCO ResiliART debates (30th July), the relief package was sceptically dubbed “Work for Pay” as it required producing work during the pandemic.

Zimbabweans were able to access relief funds through the National Arts Council of Zimbabwe which was to disburse grants emanating from funds administered by the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation, as well as the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) fund administered by Ministry of Women Affairs and Community Development, against a register of beneficiaries (UNESCO, 2020).

In Nigeria, survey respondent Ojoma Ochai noted that multi-sectoral support measures implemented were inclusive of the creative industries and included tax measures (payment deferrals, rate reductions) and small business stimulus (loans, moratorium on debt repayments and a $US1.25 Million loan facility for SMEs). A committee for the arts and creative industries proposed further tax and licensing relief with a further $US2.5Bn SME support announced under a new package. As with the pre-C-19 period, these initiatives will only benefit the commercial creative sector (music, fashion, film, TV and advertising).

Some countries were narrowly focused on providing relief related to prior earnings such as the retrospective calculations of intellectual property earnings by the Senegalese Copyright and Related Rights Office. Other funds were targeted for those infected such as that by the Ivorian Copyright Bureau for members who fell ill from C-19 (UNESCO, 2020) as well as Business and Arts South Africa's Artist Relief Grant to support artists and cultural workers infected or affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (BASA, 2020).

Cultural practitioners in all these countries expressed similar concerns about the relief measures offered from qualifying criteria, adjudication processes, modes of disbursements and accountability of many of the relief measures. Many questioned whether these prescribed funds would have any real positive impact and suggested that the cultural economy would not be able to survive a sustained set of restrictions on economic activity. Many Kenyans and South Africans have expressed scepticism about government funds due to the long history of corruption (Anonymous survey respondent). The Kenyan public also questioned government prioritising creatives over front-line workers which speak to the poor image and status of the cultural sector.

Some CCIs (music, film) were more able to benefit from the support as they were able to pivot to the digital space more easily than other art forms such as visual arts, contemporary dance and theatre arts. However, as Ojoma Ochai suggests in her survey response, even for music and film, only larger firms would be able to meet the steep criteria around turnover, staff strength and collateral.

Without exception, experts across the continent acknowledged the importance of relief measures but argued that a long-term plan was needed "given the increasing uncertainty of when this so called '*new normal*' will drag on and last", as suggested by Dr Samwanda (Zimbabwe) in his survey response. Across the continent, it revealed that government has the capacity to act and fund the sector. Professor Kimani of the Creative Economy Working Group in Kenya suggested (UNESCO ResiliART debate, 30th July) that there should be greater integration into national development agendas as the cultural economy was key to the social-economic well-being of countries. He called for a pan-African framework for advocacy and lobbying for the creative sector.

Support from the private sector includes the waiving of revenue shares by Uganda's Bandcamp (Diamond, 2020) and the allowances made by the HEVA fund to ease the burden (such as the suspension of interest charges on existing facilities, waiver on outstanding fees for affected businesses and restructured loan agreements). Institutional support was given by the Central Bank of Nigeria (for fashion, film, ICT and music), the Africa Development Bank (based on their Fashion investment programme) and Afrexim Bank (headquartered in Cairo, Egypt) for creative industry facility (Hruby & Hanan, 2020).

Interesting developments, however, were foreshadowed by these relief measures such as the collaboration or inter-ministerial cooperation evidenced in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. This coordination around relief measures and health responses across departments and ministries is one of the early success stories from C-19 which the UNESCO 2005 Convention has been largely unable to secure despite it being critical to integrating culture in sustainable development; nor has it emerged out of the continents numerous national development plans (Joffe, 2017). It is far too early to say if this coordination continues post the pandemic.

In South Africa, the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture's (DSAC) announced a relief fund of R150 million (US$8.3m) established for artists, athletes and technical personnel.

South African artists and cultural workers were quick to respond to governments initial statements of support, with Sibongile Mngoma, founder and now president of the South African Facebook social movement, Im4thearts, saying the government demonstrated a lack of leadership; the fund was narrowly prescribed as compensation for expenses incurred for cancelled DSAC-funded projects with non-DSAC-funded projects only able to apply for relief if they had a national footprint. The relief was poorly administered, inconsistently allocated and with many complaining of delays in receiving payment (Tsumele, 2020). As late as 14th July, the parliamentary portfolio committee on Sports, Arts and Culture noted with concern that only R40 million had been dispersed and strongly recommended that DSAC fast track payments, ensure the process is transparent to the public and reopen the application process for those who had not yet benefited from the relief fund (PMG, 2020).

This immediate period of relief for the South African creative sector revealed what has come to be known as the "missing middle". These cultural workers could not be served by the informal sector support (as their earnings are far higher), and were also, by virtue of their informality, unable to access small business and unemployment insurance (UIF) relief. SACO's survey showed that the most useful type of support was sector support, including playhouse streaming platforms (29%), with tax deferment (24%), live streaming programmes (23%), access to low interest loans or bridging finance (22%) following close behind (SACO, 2020).

Innovative support was offered by South African arts organisations. Some stand out examples include a mobile phone food voucher system administered through the Theatre for Benevolent Fund; the auction of specially created artist works to fund vulnerable artists by the Lockdown Collection; and the establishment of special foundations such as the Stand Foundation to provide ongoing support for international touring for contemporary SA theatre and dance.

International donors and private companies contributed to artists relief such as the partnership between the Swiss based Levedo Foundation and Pro Helvetia provision of short-term relief fund to support professional jazz musicians in South Africa, and that of Netflix, which provided an R8.3 million Covid-19 film and television relief fund to the South African Screen Federation for the hardest-hit cultural workers not eligible for other available relief (Engelbrecht, 2020).

From relief to stimulus

Months into the pandemic, creative practitioners recognised they were not "living through the pandemic" but rather needing to adapt to "living with the virus". This shifted attention to what such a future might look like and what values we would like to have embedded in a future society and economy. Across the African continent, some significant conversations and discussions have been held, beginning to think through what opportunity this "pause" in its work and practice provides. Cultural professionals are urging artists and cultural workers to use the time wisely, to reflect on practice, sustainability and diversified revenues, and on learning new skills and practicing self-care (MIAF, 2020; Wabwire, 2020).

The numerous UNESCO ResiliART debates (Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, Kenya, Nigeria) have called for a revitalisation and stimulus to the cultural economy with panellists sharing both uplifting and challenging stories of creating during lockdown, exploring new approaches to monetising the showcasing of work on digital programmes, protecting intellectual property and artists rights and providing comfort and support to the most vulnerable. These public conversations have helped develop a shared understanding and vision for the role that culture and its expressions play in African societies.

An inspiring initiative to craft and reshape the African cultural economy for sustainability is that from the Heva Fund in Kenya. The Heva Fund proposed a "new deal" for the cultural economy called the INUA Artists Relief Project, inspired by the Federal Art Project (1935–1943) known as "Roosevelt's New Deal for the Arts" launched after the Great Depression. It highlights a series of interventions needed to build the new normal as well as "a brave and robust response package", to move beyond emergency, to resilience and then to transformation.

The Heva Funds' INUA Artist Relief Project consists of five interventions from securing "incomes and artistic livelihoods"; providing fiscal and tax incentives; improving representation and voice and streamlining existing institutions; securing digital sales, royalties and licenses; and providing a creative business rescue finance facility with appropriate research and technical assistance. It recommends a KES 1.5billion creative industry guarantee facility to leverage commercial credit and suggests public policies and tax support such as local broadcast quotas, the temporary reduction of duties and taxes, support to the digital and audiovisual sector, the establishment of a funded National Arts Council as well as a CCI sector observatory to secure the "new deal" (Heva Fund, 2020).

In South Africa, the pandemic has also resulted in renewed collaborations and planning. The social movement, Im4theArts, has now been formalised as a legal entity with a constitution. During the pandemic, it held a successful 3-day online winter school and now holds weekly webinars discussing issues pertinent to the sector from gender-based violence, the rights and status of artists, to the need for multiple diversified forms of income. The organisation is unprecedented and stands out, says journalist Tsumele "as the most representative in the country with regards the arts value chain in recent history" (2020).

In an attempt to think through a future for the creative sector, an *ad hoc* group of concerned cultural professionals (CCP) came together during the pandemic, initially to consider how the cultural economy could benefit from Presidential support to the informal economy in the light of the limitations of DSACs relief offer. In recognising that more than 57% of cultural workers earned more than R2500, CCP realised that despite its precarious and risk profile, it would not be possible to include this sector in the relief being considered for the informal sector. Rather, with its higher than normal educational and wage levels, assistance needed to align to the specificities of the sector. So, while cultural workers are "neck-deep in the precarity of the gig economy" with its "intensification of anxiety and fragmentation of work" as O'Connor (2020, p. 4) shows, it is necessary to recognise their differences compared to the material conditions of the general precariat, especially in countries characterised by deep inequalities and high levels of informality (CCP, 2020).

Once the stimulus package of R500bn was announced by President Ramaphosa, the CCP group moved its focus to thinking through how those employed in the CCIs (an estimated 737,000) could be supported more proactively. What they proposed was a package of grants, incentives and opportunities for creation, research, experimentation and collaboration to retain jobs and create new income-generating opportunities.

The group, similar to the Heva Fund's thinking above, identified three phases to ensure maximum compliance to the lockdown protocols which they called, "Arts for one" (the isolation period where creation, production and research is only possible in individual homes and private spaces), "Arts for 10" (when small groups are able to gather in designated spaces) and "Arts for all" (all restrictions lifted) to revitalise society and integrate arts and culture in the life of communities throughout South Africa. The idea was to stimulate artistic and creative expressions in each of these phases through multiple funding streams and across the whole cultural economy so that even as we continued to live with the virus, artists and cultural workers would be well placed to bring work to fruition, to showcase and to build on the research and development of the earlier phases.

While the initial appeals to DSAC to consider this stimulus package went unheeded, the views found expression within the National Arts Council in preparation, respectively, for a call for C-19 compliant proposals and as a stimulus to the sector. The NAC received innovative C-19 compliant proposals from many of the provinces to uncover indigenous and contemporary stories, artistic and cultural expressions, and to reinvigorate the cultural life of communities. The NAC's submission to DSAC to implement the Presidential stimulus package for public employment mobilised the entire cultural ecosystem such that artists, cultural workers and arts organisations can be supported and sustained with new employees, interns and training and development initiatives.

It is not surprising that this "thinking at scale" was filled with complexity since cultural organisations have never had the institutional arrangements nor the resources to implement at scale. Despite the persistent view that arts and culture are marginalised by cultural ministries and government as a whole, this Presidential Public Employment Programme (which will see the NAC alone receive three times its annual budget) represents the largest ever injection of public funds into the cultural economy in South Africa and will hopefully both find longevity in future medium-term treasury budgets and also stimulate others on the continent to follow suit.

Conclusion

Reimagining and reinvigorating an unknown future for the African cultural economy has clearly begun. The fact is that many African governments were able, often for the first time or at levels unseen before, to respond to social justice arguments ensuring that the cultural economy survives the pandemic and find funds to support the sector during C-19. This is seen by civil society activists as an important first step to validate the role that the cultural economy plays on a continent which has seen extreme brutality, institutionalised oppression, wars, genocides and abject poverty; and in which arts and culture helps articulate "how we might inhabit the world in a manner that might promote human thriving not its extermination" (O'Connor, 2020, p. 12).

The recommendations that emerge from this discussion are pertinent for public authorities and other stakeholders across the continent to consider. They underscore how culture and the arts help us negotiate the human condition in times of crisis and of grief and mourning. Finding collective agreement on how African countries emerge from the restrictions could also "be leveraged to realise a transformative vision of a new economy based on equality and the right to health, well-being, and economic democratisation" (IEJ, 2020).

First, to mitigate the harsh realities of poverty and hunger, a basic income grant is critical. As the C19 Peoples Coalition statement says, “a basic income guarantee is necessary to fulfil every person’s right to food security, and to help them access other rights such as healthcare, housing and schooling” (2020, p. 3).

Second, a strong social safety net with the rights and status of artists and all cultural workers assured in appropriate legislation as suggested by the 1980 UNESCO recommendation is now urgent.

Third, is strengthening the overall infrastructure (technological, social and cultural) from partnerships and collaborations to the professionalisation of arts and culture organisations, creative enterprises and the public institutions that support the sector (from museums to theatres and galleries, funding agencies to community arts centres). Basic infrastructure such as digital connectivity to ensure free WIFI across townships, towns and villages could kickstart more private sector infrastructure investment for artistic and cultural expressions (Hruby & Hanan, 2020).

Fourth, greater economic integration is needed on the continent (Munyati, 2020), with regional value chains drawing on the strengths of different African countries (Joffe, 2019).

Fifth, is the provision of a public employment programme particularly for the youth. While the income-generating activities in the CCIs are not jobs in the regular sense (project-based, short term, irregular, seasonal, informal), it would be a mistake to conclude that providing employment opportunities is not an important consideration in the context of the potential loss of over 20 million jobs on the continent (AU, 2020). C-19 job losses in South Africa, for instance, have been shown to exacerbate inequality (2 out of 3 million were women) and affected the most disadvantaged in the labour market (NIDS-CRAM, 2020).

Sixth, is strengthening the system of cultural governance to eliminate corruption, provide accountability for public funds and transparency of all decisions. It is now vital that policymaking encompasses “other tiers of government, in particular the local level as this is where culture is experienced, created, produced, exhibited and enjoyed” (Joffe, 2019, p. 9). Cultural ministries, arts councils and other funders will need to welcome collaborations and partnerships within and outside the cultural economy (within and between countries) and support creativity and innovation within the bureaucracy.

Finally, is embracing participation with civil society to enhance the public value of the cultural economy. The discussions and debates already initiated by the UNESCO ResiliART movement on the continent begin to pave the way to a more critically engaged sector, no longer willing to accept the marginalised status of the sector or the systemic gaps that have become so apparent. Artists and cultural professionals will, in turn, be required to shift their thinking to find “new ways of practicing social-citizenship, encouraging strong neigbourhood ties after isolation, volunteerism and societal development to focus on cultural values for personal and community well-being and development” (CCP, 2020, p. 8).

Rather than the “new gold” of the cultural economy signifying a new development trajectory or securing the economic wealth of Africa, it is recognising that the African cultural economy, through government support and civil society participation and with a deep sensitivity to local cultural expressions, can be an enabler and driver of sustainable development on the continent. There is much to be done to secure a seat at the table to jointly ensure a just transition for an inclusive and transformed cultural economy on the African continent.

Note

1. Drawing on the resilience shown by the cultural sector during C-19, UNESCO launched ResiliART, a global movement joined by cultural professionals worldwide that sheds light on the current state of creative industries through virtual discussions (https://en.unesco.org./news/resiliar-artists-andcreativit-beyond-crisis). The author attended most UNESCO ResiliART debates on the continent (Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda) and hosted the South African one during the National Arts Festival.

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