Building Back Better

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The world's creative economies undoubtedly saw unprecedented challenges from COVID-19, including the loss of livelihoods. But John Newbigin reminds us in this essay that it was the inherent resilience and innovation found in culture that uplifted lives during the worst of the pandemic, and which now point the way toward a more creative, equitable and sustainable world as catalysts for change.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, creative and cultural industries constituted one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy, confidently forecast to be 10% of global GDP by 2030. Hundreds of cities were promoting themselves as "creative", sponsoring festivals of design, music, film, fashion and food in ever growing numbers, celebrating their cultural distinctiveness and, at the same time, growing their economies and promoting their international profiles. The impact of the pandemic on all this activity and growth was immense. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that, in 2020 alone, the creative industries declined in value by USD$750 billion and 10 million people were left without work. Any cultural activity that depended on live audiences or face-to-face interaction stopped, with severe long-term consequences for theatres, museums and concert halls, as well as the people who worked in them. On the other hand, online activity, or any activity that could make the switch to online, prospered. The already vast video games industry grew faster than ever, by some estimates increasing its value by 14% in a single year. And, paradoxically, while the pandemic illustrated the fragility of most creative and cultural *industries,* it proved the strength and resilience of *culture.*

In fact, it could be said that as the whole infrastructure of the global economy ground to a halt, it was the informal cultural infrastructure of communities that came to the rescue. Neighbours played music to entertain their neighbours. The online world was alive with games and gags. The *Jerusalema* dance challenge inspired people, especially public service workers, in every part of the world. As the mighty engines of global production and trade ground to a halt, it was the intangible cultural networks of communities and neighbourhoods that turned out to have the greater resilience and the most practical and nimble responses to a rapidly changing crisis—social capital rising to a challenge that finance capital was unable to meet.

We know that the negative impact of the pandemic has been almost incalculable in lives lost and livelihoods destroyed. But, as it slowly recedes, it is important to consider whether this extraordinary period we have all lived through has also had a positive impact on the relationship between cultural activity and economic activity, and the way in which culture is perceived as an aspect of public policy. Having survived the turbulence of financial and health crises, are there now some more benign tailwinds that can carry cultural and creative policy to new heights?

To start with a very simple observation, COVID-19 certainly proved to be a powerful driver of creative solutions, nowhere more so than in the pace of digitisation, epitomised by the shift to remote working and the transition of ever more businesses to the online world, evidenced by the US Bureau of Labour Statistics which suddenly doubled its pre-COVID projections for employment growth in web development and digital interface design.

While some of this change was already being driven by developments in technology, the pace of it was dictated by the pandemic. In other words, it was driven by necessity and, as ever, necessity proved to be the mother of invention. A women's co-operative in Rajasthan that had been making traditional embroidered bags for the international tourist market turned their business model upside down and began to run online courses that showed their absent customers how to make the bags for themselves, spawning an altogether new and highly profitable business. A small software company in England, realising that car buyers could not visit showrooms or test-drive cars, developed bespoke and highly detailed visualisations that allowed potential buyers to virtually drive a variety of cars with what they called "personalised buying journeys." A group of street-food vendors in Indonesia linked their food stalls to create a 'treasure hunt' that required players to decode clues and work their way across the city, sampling different local delicacies at each stop. When lockdown was imposed, they kept themselves in the public eye by re-creating the treasure hunt online with 360-degree visualisations of the city streets, and a guide who could be accessed on Zoom to comment on the city's sights, offer clues, and set occasional quizzes.

Millions of such stories of agility, imagination and innovation at every level, from informal local businesses to transnational corporations, have helped put the world's creative economy back on track as a fast-growing sector. A recent Deloitte survey of creative industry activity commissioned by Netflix, came to the optimistic conclusion that "the creative economy could grow by 40% by 2030 and add eight million jobs" in the nine countries that were studied (six in Europe and three in Asia). The researchers offered the opinion that this would be substantially based on greater collaboration between creative businesses and tech businesses.

All that is very welcome but, as well as the prospect of returning growth and jobs, there have been calls not just to "reset" the global economy, but to "build back better". Does that imply the need for a more humane, people-centred economy, finance capital rebuilding on the foundation of social capital? If the outpouring of creativity and imagination during the pandemic—much of it informal, and much of it generated in communities at neighbourhood level—helped the world cope with an unexpected and unprecedented crisis, has it also inadvertently prepared us for some of the crises, known and unknown, that we now face, such as intensifying urbanisation, increases in mental and emotional disorders, declining biodiversity and, most of all, climate change?

It has become something of a truism that COVID-19 has made many people re-evaluate their personal priorities. So it's interesting to note that a leading international communications and branding agency, Hotwire, recently offered the opinion that "in 2023 brands will craft campaigns which clearly advertise how their customers can be more than just buyers— they can be catalysts for change." Is that shift in personal perspectives reflected at a societal level?

Earlier this year, the Asian Development Bank Institute published a collection of essays under the title *Creative Economy 2030* for which, in his introduction, the Institute's Director wrote "creative industries are critical to the sustainable development agenda, as they have the potential to support inclusive, sustainable and equitable economic development." This observation, reflected in the essays themselves, by economists, government officials, investors and

community entrepreneurs, was based on an analysis of what had happened during the pandemic and on the evidence generated during 2021 which was the United Nation's "International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, 2021", an initiative driven largely by countries of the Global South, and of historic importance, despite being overshadowed by the pandemic. It highlighted the way in which economic, social, cultural and environmental goals are inextricably bound together, and can leverage added value from each other, often with culture as the essential catalyst.

These themes of inclusivity, sustainability and creativity are also reflected in a new report, *Creative Recovery? The Role of Cultural Policy in Shaping Post-COVID Urban Futures,* commissioned by the World Cities Culture Forum, and based on data gathered during the pandemic from 39 of the Forum's 40 member cities spread across five continents. Its authors, a group of academic researchers from King's College London, concluded that "within the emergency conditions that COVID-19 brought about, there were opportunities to experiment, iterate and innovate. Alongside the enormous difficulties and lessons experienced, policymakers often appreciated being forced to look at their ways of doing things, and to do things differently—and for greater freedom to develop ideas and take action at speed."

They also noted that city authorities saw these lessons as having a positive future relevance, "a key challenge, raised strongly by some research participants, is how to maintain the momentum of these exceptional periods of 'policy entrepreneurship' and innovation". The researchers reported that "75% of the cities responding to our survey worked with local communities in new ways", and their report gives many examples of innovative partnerships between city authorities and cultural organisations,

individual artists, community organisations and urban developers. They also noted that "closely connected to this, the pandemic led to innovation in the use of public space, raising important questions regarding public culture." This innovation included the extension of initiatives already widely shared between cities such as Creative Enterprise Zones, the involvement of artists in designing and animating public spaces, and the establishment of Creative Land Trusts that aim to safeguard affordable spaces for cultural and creative enterprises, not just during the immediate post-pandemic recovery period, but for the longer term, so that commercial developers cannot unfairly exploit the way in which artists and creative entrepreneurs are often the pioneers who bring new life and energy to dilapidated urban neighbourhoods.

70% of World Cities Culture Forum's member cities agreed with the statement that the pandemic "raised awareness of the importance of culture and creativity in my city". And all but one of them agreed with the statement "the disruption caused by the pandemic provided an opportunity to imagine a better way of doing things in the cultural and creative sector."

None of this minimises the reality of intensifying international tensions and the accelerating impact of climate change. Nevertheless, it is evident that COVID-19 has made individuals, institutions and governments—at every level, local and national—do some fundamental rethinking. The COVID crisis summoned up unexpected resources of creativity and imagination all around the globe. Quite coincidentally, it also helped drive transition to the digital world at exactly the moment that the digital world was itself on the brink of radical change because of artificial intelligence.

The problems, threats, crises and dangers have not disappeared. But perhaps the world has gained some

new capacity—and confidence—in addressing them, not just providing "an opportunity to imagine a better way of doing things in the cultural and creative sector" as the World Cities Culture Forum report asserted, but by putting the cultural and creative sector at the heart of the solutions we need for a more creative, equitable, and sustainable world. □

About The Author

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