

The Effect of COVID-19 on Cultural Funding and Policy in Iceland

Die Auswirkungen von COVID-19 auf Kulturfinanzierung und -politik in Island

SIGRÚN LILJA EINARSDÓTTIR,* FINNUR BJARNASON,**
NJÖRÐUR SIGURJÓNSSONS***

Bifröst University, Iceland

Abstracts

Data from a recent survey of cultural managers confirms that, as in most other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a hammer blow to the cultural sector in Iceland. The findings show that COVID-19 has had a profound effect on cultural organisations' operations in terms of cancelling or postponing activities and the reduction of contractors or temporary staff. In response, the government has committed unprecedented sums to supporting the cultural sector. We explore how the pandemic and government support has affected the cultural sector in the context of the dominant values and strong welfare orientation of Icelandic cultural policy, as well as how it measures against international trends.

Daten aus einer kürzlich durchgeführten Umfrage unter Kulturmanagern bestätigen, dass die COVID-19-Pandemie dem Kultursektor in Island wie in den meisten anderen Ländern einen schweren Schlag versetzt hat. COVID-19 hatte tiefgreifende Auswirkungen auf die Tätigkeit von Kulturorganisationen, indem Aktivitäten abgesagt oder verschoben und Vertragspartner oder Freiberufler nicht beschäftigt wurden. Als Reaktion darauf hat die Regierung nie dagewesene Summen zur Unterstützung des Kultursektors bereitgestellt. Wir untersuchen, wie sich die Pandemie und die staatliche Unterstützung auf den Kultursektor vor dem Hintergrund vorherrschender Werte und einer starken Wohlfahrtsorientierung der isländischen Kulturpolitik ausgewirkt haben und wie sie sich mit internationalen Trends vergleichen lassen.

Schlagworte / Keywords

Kreativindustrien / creative industries, Kultur / culture, Kulturbetrieb / arts organizations, cultural organizations, Kulturfinanzierung / financing the arts, Kulturpolitik / cultural policy

* Email: sigrunlilja@bifrost.is

** Email: finnurb19@bifrost.is

*** Email: njordur@bifrost.is

Introduction

At the time that this paper was written in early 2021, it was impossible to fully comprehend the effects of COVID-19 on the cultural and creative industries since the pandemic was still running its course. Observing economic statistics and the fact that many cultural organisations either had to alter their operations or completely close down, particularly during the first two to three waves of the pandemic, there were clear signs that the impact was more akin to a hammer blow than a mere temporary setback. The short-term effects may revolve more around financial issues, but the long-term effects are not yet known and could run deeper in terms of possible loss of human resources and a 'brain drain.' One of the participants in this research claimed in an open question that COVID-19 would probably lead to a total collapse in the cultural sector that might take a long time to recover, even longer than the tourism industry, because it would be a challenge to reconstruct the intangible part of the operation, such as human resources.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in February 2020, Iceland had, to a great extent realigned itself with the classic Nordic model of cultural policy (see MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION 2013), which, according to Mangset et al. (2008) translates to one that is welfare-oriented and egalitarian, highly subsidised and central to national identity, while stressing access and homogeneity. The beginning of the century had witnessed a turbulent period culminating with the financial crash in 2008, when cultural policy was increasingly characterized by an emphasis on new public management and even neo-liberal politics (EIRIKSSON/SIGURJONSSON 2009; HAFSTEINSSON/ARNADOTTIR 2010). An unprecedented influx of private money became available for cultural undertakings (BERGMANN 2014) and every aspect of culture, media, and the arts was influenced by association with newly rich capitalists who had an interest in the arts (VILHJALMSSON 2014). When the financial crash arrived in 2008, many cultural projects were left high and dry and, in Reykjavík, a half-built symphony hall faced possible demolition due to the collapse of its public-private financing agreement. Cultural funding was therefore obliged to return to its previous norms of government dominance.

Iceland has strong artists' unions and has traditionally been sceptical towards private sponsorship. Iceland has one of the highest levels of cultural funding in the world per capita, spending double the average of its Nordic neighbours (STATISTICS ICELAND 2020c). This has remained

remarkably consistent during left and right governments, and cultural spending is rarely challenged or criticised in the public forum. But while the government's strong response to the COVID crisis (GOVERNMENT OF ICELAND 2021) seems to assert this stance, it might nevertheless seem at odds with developments elsewhere.

In Iceland, strengthening the Icelandic language is viewed as key to continued independence and accordingly consumes a large part of the cultural budget, and new developments in the arts are frequently adapted to a fabricated, collective identity (VALTÝSSON 2011). There are also strong financial incentives for subsidising culture through the tourist industry, which has come to dominate the Icelandic economy in the last decade. But even though official policy documents make some mention of the financial and political role of culture (see MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE), the explicit reason for the inclusion of arts and culture in welfare provision is the longstanding belief that the arts have positive effects on people and, by extension, improve society (MULCAHY 2017; BELFIORE/BENNETT 2007; 2010; SHUSTERMAN 2000). It nevertheless remains difficult to know what cultural participation might mean in policy terms. Engagement is generally understood to be passive and most of the funding goes to the high arts while there is a lack of policy encouraging people to engage actively and creatively, for example with online materials. This seems even more evident now that the pandemic had pushed practically all cultural activity online, at least temporarily.

This paper observes the impact of COVID-19 on Icelandic cultural institutions from the viewpoint of cultural managers. For clarification, the definition of the term cultural manager is vague and has changed considerably over the last decades. Writing about the USA, Peterson (1986) observes that cultural managers were historically perceived as heads of cultural institutions (museums, orchestras or opera houses), almost exclusively men (referred to as *impresarios*), often with a diverse and colourful background, who firmly ruled over their staff while displaying charm towards wealthy benefactors. From the 1960s, the roles started to change with increased government funding that called for regulations on transparency and accountancy, as well as other forms of bureaucracy requiring specialised knowledge. These stipulations were initially met by hiring people with business experience. University degrees in cultural management started appearing in the mid 1970's and their number quickly grew (PETERSON 1986). Most western democracies witnessed similar developments and in the last two decades of the 20th century,

dedicated training paths and degree courses for cultural managers played a large role in shaping the profession (SCOTT 2017). Cultural managers in coordinating or leadership roles, successors to the impresarios of old, are now described as ambassadors of sorts who work to facilitate cooperation between different disciplines and professions (MULCAHY 2003; KUESTERS 2010). They have similarly been described as ‘masters of interspaces’ who are able to make use of network theory to see what to emphasize and where to strengthen connections (WOLFRAM/PEPER/FÖHL 2016); the interspaces navigated refer to the gap between various cultural activities and the world of administration and planning, which amounts to the manoeuvring space of the cultural manager (KANGAS/ONSÉR-FRANZÉN 1996).

But the idea of the cultural manager as a modern impresario belies the messiness of what is in some ways more of a category than a specific profession. Despite the increased alignment of the educational requirements, and despite the homogenising effect on cultural management occasioned by institutions becoming more alike, not least within the public sector (DIMAGGIO/POWELL 1983), many different jobs might claim the title of cultural manager. Some of these belong to a more traditional education and career, such as that of the librarian or curator, while others, including various types of project management or festival organisation are less clear.

In this paper the effect of the pandemic is examined with regards to the findings of our survey of cultural managers in Iceland. For the survey, we decided to cast a wide net, defining a cultural manager as someone who bears responsibility for one or more fundamental aspect of a cultural organization, also defined in the widest sense. It therefore ranges from the top and middle managers in large Icelandic cultural institutions, such as the National Theatre, to those organising small exhibitions, concerts, and one man shows, where the artist herself is likely to play the role of cultural manager. It further includes not only those in charge of coordinating but also those in charge of marketing, production, outreach, and finance. Although this definition was immediately challenged by our results, which showed that only a minority of the participants think of themselves as cultural managers (45% of the women and 36% of the men), we nevertheless believe that a firm understanding of the cultural sector is a prerequisite, even if one’s area of expertise is finance or marketing. Our aim was to understand better the background, education, and circumstances of those working in cultural management in Iceland, as well as how they had been affected by to the COVID-19 crisis.

In this paper, we begin by explaining the methods and results of the survey before detailing the effects of the pandemic. We then discuss the government response and how pandemic-related funding may have been targeted and received, considering the large discrepancies between grassroots organisations and large national institutions. Finally, we discuss how the response to COVID may reflect trends that have been inherent in cultural policy for many decades. The research question put forward is the following:

What are the actual, as well as potential, effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on cultural policy and public funding in Iceland?

Method

The survey was active between September 23 and October 14, 2020 and was conducted online through Lime Survey. 694 invitations were sent out and 470 replied, 373 of which completed the survey (N=373).

The survey is limited to the traditional definition of culture as the visual- performing- and written arts as well as museums. The scope of activity covered by the survey encompasses the following: literary publishing, music publishing, galleries, film, video, and television production, performing arts, visual arts, venues and other facilities for cultural activity, Libraries and archives, museums, historic sites and buildings or similar tourist attractions. This constitutes a narrower definition of the cultural sector than the UNESCO definition of the cultural industry (2009) or the EUROSTAT definition of the creative sector (2021), both of which include architecture, fashion design, computer game design, and more.

The survey was divided into four parts: The first part asked about the workplace, the second about participants' education and experience, the third part about the effects of COVID-19 on their respective cultural organisations, and the fourth about demographic features. In relation to COVID-19, participants were asked about the extent to which events had been cancelled or postponed, the extent to which broadcasting and online activity had replaced normal activity and how. We also asked whether Icelandic visitors had made up for the lack of foreign tourists, whether the organisation had received emergency government support, and how the pandemic had affected employee status. Finally, we asked whether respondents believed the pandemic highlighted a need to restructure the cultural sector and, if so, how.

The survey population was constructed using online databases that included every cultural offering readily accessible to the public in 2019-2020. The sample was compiled by collecting professional email addresses and was kept as large as possible. The database was assembled using webpages of various cultural organisations or other available online information, sometimes contacting chosen organisations to find which recipients best matched the definition of cultural manager as defined by the research team.

Findings: The effects of the pandemic

In Iceland, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a difficult stress test for the arts, ruthlessly exposing several dependencies and weaknesses within the sector. This was confirmed by official data published by Statistics Iceland at the end of October 2020, showing that in the period stretching to August 2020, salaries in the cultural sector were down 23% compared with the previous year, even before the second wave of the pandemic struck in the autumn of 2020 (STATISTICS ICELAND 2020a).

The results of the survey reflect the fact that the Icelandic cultural sector is to a large extent dependent on public funding. Half of the respondents (N=373) reported working for an institution whose funding is enshrined in law, another 37% claimed their institution received either regular or occasional government grants while only 11% claimed to be completely independent of public subsidy. The cultural management-related job market seems to be overwhelmingly female. The key demographics were the following:

- 63% were women and 36% men;
- 98% identified of Icelandic origin;
- 2% of respondents were 21-30 years, 23% were 31-40, 27% were 41-50, 30% were 51-60, 15% were 61-70 and 3% were 71 and over;
- 62% had postgraduate degrees, 23% had undergraduate degree and 7% had some vocational or secondary school degree;
- 39% had management education;
- 46% worked at a public cultural organisation, 25% worked at a private organisation and 16% at an NGO;
- 73% had a full-time position at their organisation.

As well as questions on demographics, education and experience, participants were asked several questions about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their organisations.

Effects of activities and events	Agreed
The pandemic affected my organization	93%
Forced to postpone or cancel activities	75%
Some activities moved onto digital media (Zoom, YouTube)	65%
Live or recorded events streamed	50%
Organizations' increased online presence (through social media)	72%
Increased visits from natives made up for the shortfall of foreign tourists	29%

Table 1: *Effects of COVID-19 on activities and events*

As expected, 93% of all respondents claimed the pandemic had affected their organisations, forced them to postpone or cancel activities or move some of them onto digital media such as Zoom and YouTube. Furthermore, roughly half had offered streamed live or recorded events, while 72% said their organisations had increased their online presence, in particular through use of social media (79%).

Funding and staff issues	Agreed
My organization received emergency government support	35%
Forced to reduce number of regular staff due to Covid	16%
Cancelled the hiring of contractors and temporary staff	46%
Forced to back out of agreements with contractors	19%

Table 2: Funding and staff issues

Interestingly, only 35% of all respondents claimed their organisations had received emergency government support. The results further revealed that only 16% of respondents had been forced to reduce the number of regular staff, perhaps reflecting the relative stability of the state backing of most of the organisations. 46% of respondents, however, had cancelled hiring contractors or temporary staff while 19% had been

forced to back out of agreements with contractors, indicating the proportion of work in the sector that is outsourced to independent producers.

In terms of the effects of the collapse in tourism resulting from closed borders all over the world, only 29% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that increased visits from natives had made up for the shortfall of foreign tourists. The consequences of this are echoed in a report issued in September 2020 following a survey of 48 Icelandic museums, which reveals that foreign tourists now account for 62% of museum guests. The revenue of museums has accordingly collapsed while costs have mostly remained stable. They have furthermore had to solve the logistical problems of complying with rules about the maximum number of guests allowed inside the venues, sometimes only 10 or fewer (GESTSDÓTTIR et al. 2020). It is further reasonable to assume that a good portion of the 11% of our survey respondents who do not receive any state subsidy are engaged, in some way, in the many and varied cultural offerings aimed chiefly at tourists. These are likely to have suffered a similar, or worse drop in museums and exhibitions revenue.

To summarise the findings of our survey, it confirms the profound effect of COVID-19 on the cultural sector in Iceland, which is unsurprising since the pandemic has left few parts of society untouched. Some organisations have moved activity online where possible, and most of the organisations have been able to hold onto their permanent staff. The collapse in tourism does not appear to have been made up for by increased local traffic while independent contractors have been the most likely to lose their contracts with cultural institutions.

Response to the pandemic

The Icelandic government responded strongly to the crisis and early on raised the amount, and increased the number of its annual artists' stipends, which are a 3–12-month salary awarded annually to 325 artists via an arm's length procedure. These were in addition to an already robust general economic response to the pandemic, including grants for those forced to close their premises between the end of April 2020 and May 2021, grants to subsidise wages when hiring those that have been unemployed, bridging loans and cash-flow loans for companies, deferral of tax payments, partial grants for severance pay, vouchers for everyone over 20 years old to spend with Icelandic tourist firms and other forms of direct and indirect support for the tourist industry, as well as various

other measures. In addition to this, the relatively robust unemployment benefits had been raised and topped up with a Christmas bonus (GOVERNMENT OF ICELAND 2020). Compared with the Nordic countries, the Icelandic response was among the strongest both on the basis of per capita and as percentage of GDP, with only Denmark spending more (BERGE/STORM/HYLLAND 2021).

The original financial support packages, however, were not well suited to the self-employed, who were falling through the cracks of the support system. A joint report, issued by artists' associations and industry organisations in the Icelandic music sector (2020), revealed that in Iceland, as elsewhere, the popular music industry—the original gig economy—had emerged as particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. The complete cancellation of independent concerts and events caused particular hardship for self-employed cultural workers, such as musicians and their supporting professions. Musicians are commonly self-employed, dividing their time between performing with various groups and at varied occasions such as concerts, festivals, parties, restaurants, theatres, funerals, and weddings. Having lost most of the revenue from record sales with the advent of streaming, any royalties musicians might have gained from having their recordings played in public places, such as shops or cafés, has also dried up during extensive closures. Many musicians supplement their income with teaching or other work, and this mix of employment, or so-called portfolio careers, means that many have not been eligible for full unemployment benefits (REYNISDÓTTIR/JÓNATANSDÓTTIR 2020). Arts and music festivals rely, to an even greater extent, on precarious cultural workers, which is relevant because the hegemony of cultural institutions has arguably been eroded by the festivalisation and eventualisation of cultural events (MANGSET 2020).

Musicians therefore felt compelled to organise and raise awareness about the many people who were unable to access financial support, highlighting a discrimination between those comfortable with the bureaucracy involved and thus able to make use of the financial support, and those who lacked the wherewithal to access that support. Those of the first category were attached to organisations, while the latter were usually individuals in less formal employment. This echoes similar reports from other parts of the world where initial public support schemes frequently proved ill adapted to the idiosyncrasies of the cultural sector, in particular the self-employed or part-time employed in the arts, or those with portfolio careers (TRAVKINA/SACCO 2020).

The Icelandic government eventually responded in November 2020 with legislation aimed both at helping the arts and the struggling tourist industry and creating a fund for firms and individuals who lost at least 40% of earnings between April and October 2020. Subsequently, a contingency grant was made available for those who suffered a minimum of 60% drop in revenue between November 2020 and May 2021. There was nevertheless some doubt as to whether artists were actually managing to access funds targeted at helping them. Musicians expressed concern that only 7% of those who had applied by early March 2021 were from the cultural sector, or 126 applicants, while 93% were from the tourism sector (GOVERNMENT OF ICELAND 2021).

Official figures also show that cultural jobs are intertwined with many other industries, such as catering or construction, and the ratio of self-employed or independents is also higher than in other professions, 24.5% vs 10.6% (STATISTICS ICELAND 2020b). These professionals were generally not reached by our survey and are therefore only reflected in the data as contractors who were cancelled, or not hired. There were nonetheless some revealing answers to open questions, shedding light on some of the more precarious parts of the cultural sector. One survey participant was critical of the disproportionate amount of voluntary work required:

In many parts of the cultural sector ... the proportion of voluntary work is unhealthy, especially where original work is being created. There is little or no opportunity to generate income, and ... funding is based entirely on grant applications, which is both a lot of work and has an uncertain outcome. Therefore, we have learned to live with that uncertainty and created a structure where no one is in a fixed employment ratio and there is no superstructure, 0%.

This view was echoed by another respondent from an independent cultural society who claimed most of the work was done on a voluntary basis, while contractors were hired to deliver certain cultural programmes. A third respondent noted that although the organisation in question wanted and needed to increase activity on social media, they had neither the skills nor manpower to do so, highlighting another potential imbalance between larger institutions and the smaller, grassroots.

It is unclear how these smaller organisations have weathered the pandemic and how much they have been able to make use of government support. There is some perception that while measures may have softened the blow for small enterprises and individuals, their main achievement has been to save the large, state financed cultural institutions, such as the National Theatre and Symphony Orchestra, while the smaller,

decentralised institutions have had to struggle (BERGE/STORM/HYLLAND 2021).

Discussion

As in most studies, there are limitations to both the validity and reliability of findings. In this case, Icelandic society is hopefully escaping from the eye of the pandemic storm, but the long-term effects of COVID-19 are yet to surface. The research question for this study was the following: *What are the actual as well as potential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on cultural policy and public funding in Iceland?*

The findings of our study demonstrated that COVID-19 has had a profound effect on cultural organisations' operations in terms of cancelling or postponing activities, increased online streaming of live or recorded events, and in cancellations of contractor and temporary staff employment. While the pandemic caused an increase in online presence, it is not clear whether this represents progress, in contrast to some other sectors (like healthcare), and whether the development of online services was jumpstarted over a more rapid period of two to three years as a result. Only a minority of cultural institutions were forced to cut back on the number of regular staff due to the pandemic, but more were forced to back out of agreements with contractors. Furthermore, one third received government support, which our summary (above) shows was fairly generous, albeit not perfectly targeted. This is very much in line with the historic development of governmental policy in terms of funding for cultural activities and organisations in general, from the viewpoint of access and inclusion of arts for everyone.

With the pandemic exposing some of the structural issues of the cultural sector, it is necessary to consider what shapes our ideas about *value* in terms of culture and its role in what might constitute a good life. Here, neoliberal market ideology has been very influential in the past several decades and cultural policy has adopted a more transactional character where the benefits of cultural spending must be clearly quantified. Culture is increasingly thought of in terms of fleeting *experiences*, which some argue risks overlooking how it is interwoven into the general context of our lives (O'BRIEN 2014). There is also the risk of attaching only commodity value to a part of our existence that intrinsically belongs to a gift economy, namely the arts (HYDE 2007 [1983]). This fact is partly recognised through funding that does not dictate the outcome, thereby

avoiding the appearance of a transaction, and is accommodating of development, experiments, and failures.

In terms of exploring the actual, as well as potential, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on cultural policy and public funding in Iceland, our survey indicates that the strong government response to the crisis reflects the acceptance of the dominant role of the Icelandic state in culture provision. But it has also highlighted some of the structural problems and inequalities that are a recurring theme of cultural policy, thereby providing an opportunity for a renewed dialogue on its future.

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