



**HOW TO RECOVER FROM
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?**

**SUSTAINABILITY,
VALUE AND ADVOCACY
FOR THE GRASSROOTS
CULTURAL SECTOR**

TRANS EUROPE HALLES, 2022



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INTRODUCTION

As winter was about to turn to spring in Europe in March 2020, people across the continent started rushing back to their homes with their suitcases and their backpacks. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across Europe and beyond, millions of people entered into lockdown, deprived of their daily social and cultural life, which is something we took for granted. Europeans were faced with probably the most severe isolation from public space since World War II.

A few months later, a panicky feeling turned into gloomy clouds of uncertainty that blurred the path to the foreseeable horizon of future. After two years of life under a pandemic, the weather forecast is still looking cloudy for grassroots cultural centres.

When the pandemic first struck, all of us in the Trans Europe Halles Coordination office were scratching our heads to figure out how to support our members through the lockdowns and during the pandemic.

Our members are grassroots cultural centres. In a nutshell, they help people to connect with each other through culture and arts. We thought at first that isolation and lockdown would mean total and absolute dissolution of their businesses, and hence the end of our network. Well, not so fast...

In this publication, we would like to tell the story of our experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. The journey of European grassroots cultural centres has never been an easy one.

We at Trans Europe Halles have been around for almost 40 years. We have lived through a lot and have told many stories. This is our story of the pandemic. It is about sustainability, value and advocacy.

Our story starts in front of our laptops, connected to our team meeting. We asked ourselves: How can we know the current situation for every member and use this knowledge for the benefit of our members? Answers converge in two different camps. Camp 1 collect numbers, Camp 2 just to talk to them.

Then, we do both. First, we launch a survey to understand the numbers in our network. How big they are, how many people do they host, what is their turnover and more. So, we asked those questions.

We found out that Trans Europe Halles in the year 2019 collectively included:

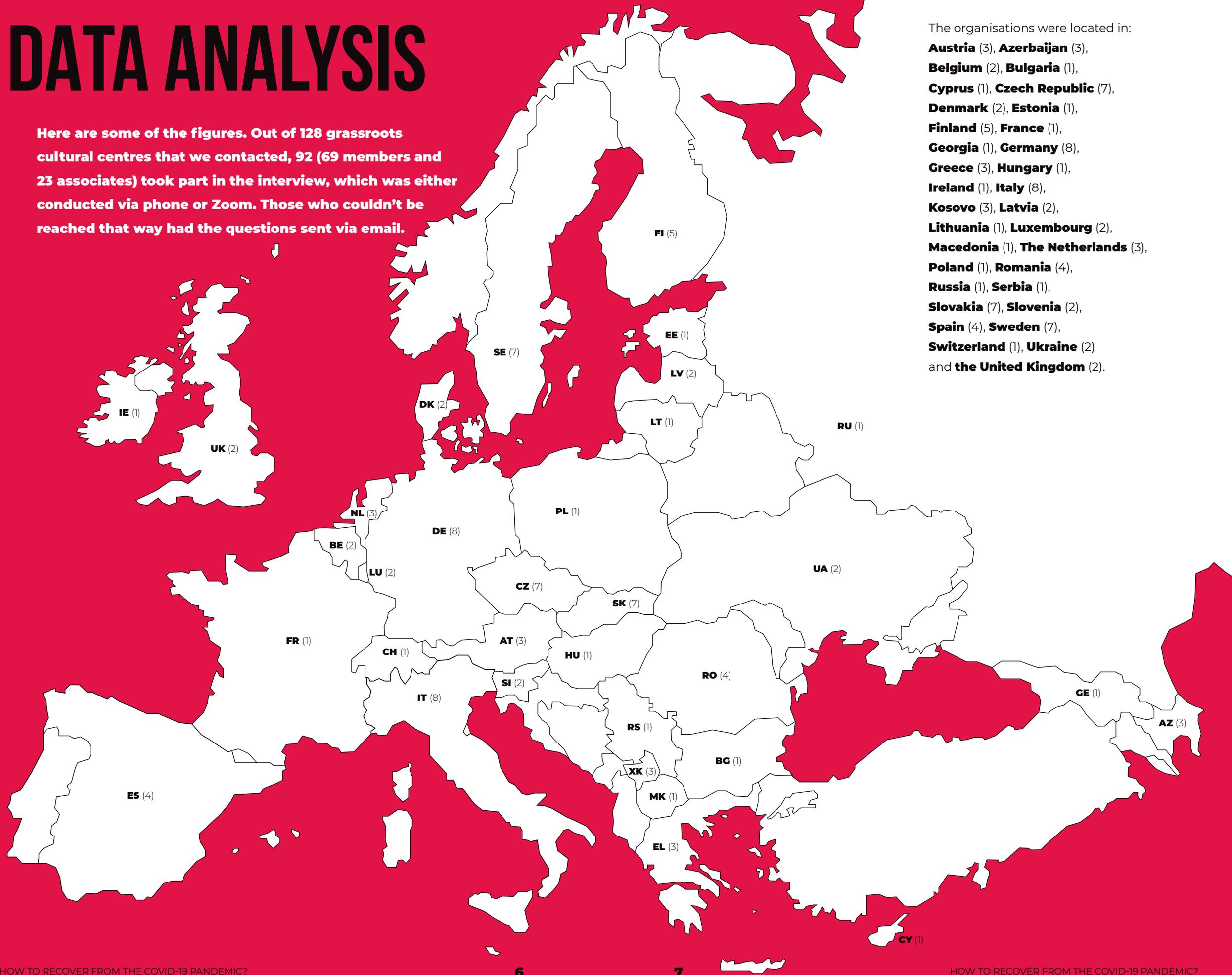
HALF-A-MILLION	SQUARE METRES OF CULTURAL SPACE
€70 MILLION	(COMBINED ANNUAL TURNOVERS)
5.4 MILLION	VISITORS AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS
13,731	PUBLIC EVENTS
2,000	STAFF
2,245	ARTISTS
1,835	VOLUNTEERS

That's how we established a baseline. Our network is bigger than the Vatican City in terms of our physical footprint and it hosts nearly as many visitors than the total population of Finland. When all our members are

combined, we are financially the size of a small- and medium-sized company. So far so good. The next step was talking to our members. That was a bit different, challenging and more interesting.

DATA ANALYSIS

Here are some of the figures. Out of 128 grassroots cultural centres that we contacted, 92 (69 members and 23 associates) took part in the interview, which was either conducted via phone or Zoom. Those who couldn't be reached that way had the questions sent via email.



The organisations were located in:
Austria (3), **Azerbaijan** (3),
Belgium (2), **Bulgaria** (1),
Cyprus (1), **Czech Republic** (7),
Denmark (2), **Estonia** (1),
Finland (5), **France** (1),
Georgia (1), **Germany** (8),
Greece (3), **Hungary** (1),
Ireland (1), **Italy** (8),
Kosovo (3), **Latvia** (2),
Lithuania (1), **Luxembourg** (2),
Macedonia (1), **The Netherlands** (3),
Poland (1), **Romania** (4),
Russia (1), **Serbia** (1),
Slovakia (7), **Slovenia** (2),
Spain (4), **Sweden** (7),
Switzerland (1), **Ukraine** (2)
and **the United Kingdom** (2).

SUSTAINABILITY

Even though there is no agreed definition nor any universal way of achieving organisational sustainability, generally it can be understood by the colloquial phrase, 'keep the business going' (Colbert & Kurucz, 2007), or by the idea of 'achieving success today without compromising the needs of the future' (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). In fact, according to Hailey (2014), organisational sustainability should be seen as an ongoing process that involves interaction between different elements – namely strategic, organisational, programmatic, social and financial. It is the latter, however, that is crucial for the effectiveness and the long-term survival of any type of organisation, including civil society organisations and all types of non-governmental organisations. Consequently, it should not be surprising that some organisations struggle to achieve organisational sustainability, especially those with limited funding opportunities.

According to data published by Eurostat in 2019, the European Union's 27 Member States reported nearly €162 billion expenditure on 'recreation, culture and religion'. Even though this amount might seem generous, this figure was equivalent to only 1.2 per cent of the EU's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while 0.5 per cent GDP was devoted to 'cultural services', 0.4 per cent to 'recreational and sporting services', 0.2 per cent to 'broadcasting and publishing services',

and 0.1 per cent to 'religious and other community services' (Eurostat, 2021). In comparison, the European Union spent less money on two other sectors, namely 'environmental protection' (0.8 per cent) and 'housing and community amenities' (0.6 per cent).

The cultural and creative sectors are not the only sectors that are suffering in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it is fair to say that, after two years of pandemic and isolation, these sectors are on life-support. We cannot ignore the fact that culture is extremely vulnerable to funding cuts since it receives very little attention financially from the European Union and its Member States, especially now, during the pandemic. Recognising the vulnerability of the sector, Cultural Action Europe, together with more than 110 European cultural networks and organisations, coordinated joint actions and two open letters asking EU Member States to ensure an explicit inclusion of culture in their National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRP) (Culture Action Europe, 2021). In 2021, they published a report that followed up on their efforts to specifically earmark at the very least 2 per cent of each NRRP for culture. The results were disappointing. Only 53 per cent (14 out of 26 countries) included culture in their NRRPs. Importantly, the majority of the Member States did not earmark any specific percentage of recovery and resilience funds for

The Trans Europe Halles Board and staff members spent hours reaching out to members from Spain to Azerbaijan and from Norway to Malta. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, English, German, Italian, Serbo-Croat, Slovak, Spanish and Swedish. Afterwards, everything was translated into English.

In total, the respondents have been asked nine sets of questions:

1) How is Covid-19 affecting your organisation's operation? What impacts are you experiencing? For example, funding cuts; closed venues; job losses, contracts terminated, etc.

2) Did you have to cut staff costs? What measures did you opt for? Lay-off? Non-renewal of contracts?

3) Are you benefiting from/applying to any public policies measures? If so, what kind of measure is it?

4) What is the biggest challenge for your organisation post-Covid?

5) Do you have any ideas/suggestions for a more sustainable cultural activity?

6) How do you see the future trajectory of the, both in terms of issues to be tackled and practices to be challenged?

7) Do you have any ideas about what networks like TEH should rethink in order to be more

relevant, sustainable and impactful?

8) What are your specific expectations/wishes towards TEH regarding the new political, social, environmental and economic challenges after 2020?

9) How can TEH support the work of your organisation?

All the data was analysed using Atlas.ti, a programme designed for qualitative data analysis. In total, three people were involved in the process. First, all three researchers pre-coded three chosen cases. Following the discussions, one person from the team prepared a codebook, which was later used to code 92 of the interviews.

The codebook was improved, and codes were added regularly. In total, there were 418 codes. Further discussions between two of the members revealed three main themes: sustainability, value and advocacy.

culture. They mostly kept spending at around 1 per cent of the budget, which was less than the authors campaigned for. Additionally, what seemed to be concerning was the fact that vast support was devoted to interventions that could justify meeting milestones and targets prioritising big institutional players, while ignoring the cultural independent scene and micro and small organisations (Culture Action Europe, 2021).

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the research conducted in spring 2020 by Trans Europe Halles showed that the biggest concern for most of the cultural centres was related to their finances. It proved to be extremely hard for the centres to react, manage and plan in such unpredictable times. Not many centres could count on financial assistance to get them through the pandemic-related crisis. The data collected shows that the majority of the grassroots cultural organisations received no public funding. This means that either no funding was available, that no funding opportunities had been announced yet, that the organisation was waiting for a decision regarding the application or that it did not meet the requirements for any available financial support.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE RESPONSES:

'City is reshuffling the cultural budget. We don't know what is going to happen. We are dependent on the city of Łódź. We don't know if we qualify for any public policy measures.'

TEH member, Poland

'We applied for support in the "Anti virus" program, which will support 80% of labor costs. It is state support as long as the organization has been closed by government regulations. It drags on terribly.'

TEH member, Denmark

'No government support, no city support.'

TEH member, Estonia

'The whole organisation won't get anything, but maybe the hostel might get something from the government. Georgia is not rich and our sector won't be the priority.'

TEH member, Georgia

Even though most of the organisations did not receive financial assistance directly, their employees did. Many of the cultural centres reported that the salaries of their employees were partly or fully paid by government schemes. Consequently, a significant number of centres managed to keep some or all of their staff. Some of the centres were forced to reduce working hours, change contracts and agreements to project-based schemes or lay off their employees completely. For some of the employees, the changes meant a reduction in their salaries or no regular salaries guaranteed. Those who were laid-off were either replaced by non-permanent staff paid by the hour or were not replaced at all. The groups that were the most affected were the freelancers and contractors whose contracts were often simply not renewed. Many of the collaborating artists and technicians were not booked for events and workshops.

HERE ARE SOME VIEWS ON THIS:

'National Salary Support: they pay 90% if you are totally out of income. If you have less income, the government gives you what you lost. Local funding is not needed at this moment. It is all depending on how long this will continue. Of course, it is doable for a couple of months, if this continues, many organisations will be in trouble. Culture is not the first priority to save: there is some support but not very much.'

TEH member, The Netherlands

'Local normal grants for the program are cancelled for this year. Some artists – small number gets a little support from the state.'

TEH member, Serbia

'All 2/3 of staff on unemployed money, all freelance contracts cancelled.'

TEH member, Austria

'There is a national social fund for independent artists, but this is only for individuals and the poorest.'

TEH member, Bulgaria

'We directly, no; some artists get small support from the state.'

TEH associate, Macedonia

'Cut down the staff costs. We pay salaries. We have 2 parts in salaries, permanent and flexible. We cut the flexible.'

TEH member, Russia

'We are not sure if we can work with freelancers like we did before.'

TEH member, France

Since the restrictions have involved limited human contact, the majority

of the cultural centres lost their main sources of income, as they had to close their venues to the public. They could not run their planned programmes and festivals; they could not provide services and activities; and their income from rental agreements was either reduced or disappeared completely. Many looked for alternative or new arrangements – turning offline workshops, classes, activities, concerts and even residencies into online and remote formats.

Feelings about the online format were very mixed. Some saw it as an opportunity to stay connected with their audience, continue projects, find other sources of income or simply try something new. For others, doing things online was seen as an unsatisfactory replacement with no artistic value:

'Loss of all sponsors, project in schools suspended except for a small part online, programming cancelled, residences cancelled.'

TEH associate, Italy

'Festivals cancelled. Human Rights Festival is usually financing human rights projects by donations/sponsoring; this is missing. All other events cancelled too – big lack of income. Rentals also cancelled, income lacking.'

TEH member, Germany

'Around 50% of the activities have been rebooked for the fall. The other half has been done as online events. We are also supposed to support local cultural actors, which is hard when a lot of organisations want to rebook their activities and the space/time is limited.'

TEH associate, Sweden

'Later we started doing online events. But for us, it's like licking ice cream through a glass. We did the first online action 1.4. In our opinion, it has no artistic value, but rather a sense of communication towards the team and ordinary viewers.'

TEH member, Slovakia

What made matters worse was the unpredictability of the situation as it was uncertain how long the Covid restrictions would last. Many respondents said that, even though they might be keeping their heads above water now, they might not be able to do so for a prolonged period of time. This put the cultural centres under a significant amount of stress. Additionally, our members and associates did not know how extreme the pandemic-related restrictions would be and how expensive it would be to apply them to the new settings. This made it almost impossible to manage the crisis and choose the right course of action. Many of the centres were either moving their activities to online settings, rescheduling to later dates or using their own savings. Grassroots cultural centres were highly concerned about what would happen to their organisations if they were not able to run their planned festivals and activities later that year.

'Cash flow, the bar doesn't work, everything is closed, the owner of the house will not give a discount to the rent, they got payment time, but we will survive, summer is more important because of events and sales so winter is a problem, previous tax depth is a problem.'

TEH member, Latvia

'Spring is the most active period for us – rentals, theatre showcases (9 smaller festivals) so we lose a lot of income and at the same time we have to return funds that are already partially spent. Some activities have moved to autumn, but some are not.'

TEH member, Czech Republic

'It is not clear what is going to happen. Project management is not doable. Planning is impossible. Normally, I can react to the crisis, but I can't react to the abstract. We don't know if we can organise events when we want to. No one knows [what] the borders will be. Some activities can't be done online, especially theatre. It is not yet clear when and how we can do things again.'

TEH associate, Ukraine

'While we don't know when normal or new normal will be here, little is known about how it will be. Mostly the challenge is uncertainty.'

TEH member, Hungary

'Big houses can count on support from Flanders and Belgium but those are temporary. Probably they can survive for 6 months, but what happens afterwards with social distancing measures?'

TEH member, Belgium

What also seemed to be a big challenge was the lack of ability to foresee the behaviour of the audiences once the restrictions were less harsh or were lifted completely. Most TEH members did not know how they could attract both audiences and artists back. In fact, many talked about the uncertainty related to regaining

trust, re-establishing and recovering their relationship with the audiences and the public. Big concerns included not knowing whether the potential audiences would be interested or would feel safe taking part in activities in the future. Having switched everything to online formats, some centres worried that the audiences would not be interested in physical events anymore. What contributed to the discomfort was the fact that the grassroots cultural centres did not know the shape or form of post-Covid cultural activity.

'Socially distanced gigs wouldn't be financially sustainable for us. We're at the point that we're worried about going bankrupt before the crisis is over if the government stops their support schemes or doesn't come up with a specific scheme for the cultural sector and creative industries.'

TEH member, United Kingdom

'How to reach the audience in 2021 again? how to deal with the fear of the audience? how to keep all services going after covid? there was really a good drive before covid which was new to us, so how to keep that going?'

TEH member, Germany

'How will people react after the lock down, are they coming to events, what kind of message comes from the government, are the events safe? Do people still have money to go to events?'

TEH associate, Finland

'If we think about restarting events, there's a lot of dismay and confusion: how to do that? How would people

react? How would this change participation? We have to rebuild faith in our project and we need a new model and more time.'

TEH associate, Italy

Even though some of the grassroots cultural centres seemed to feel secure and managed to both keep their employees and find alternative sources of income, they were the exception rather than the rule. The organisational sustainability of those centres that were not lucky enough to receive financial assistance or savings to draw on was significantly at risk. The above quotes show the difficulties faced by the centres when acting in accordance with their best interests. Unable to foresee the future regarding the behaviour of grant holders and audiences, most TEH members were left to look for alternative solutions, not knowing whether they would benefit their organisation in the long run.

Switching their activities to online formats and hoping for the best was all they had left in their toolkit, as most of their often-diverse sources of income had dried up. This severely threatened their sustainability and consequently their survival. Unsurprisingly, the majority of our members were under an extreme amount of stress since they realised that keeping their centres up and running was not a priority for most of the municipalities and governments. The crisis seemed to only manifest what was already known: the culture and cultural sector are not valued highly enough.

VALUE

Capitalism has moulded us in significant ways to pay attention mainly to concepts such as productivity, wealth and constant growth. One of the greatest weaknesses of this system is the fact it confuses price with value. Therefore, the more expensive something is, the more valuable it is considered to be (Mazzuccato, 2018). Concepts that have an unclear economic value or where the value is hard to calculate are losing the battle when it comes to proving their importance. Consequently they are receiving less attention, not only from the public but also from potential private investors. What is more, there is a tendency to look at the less profitable sectors as being less important and less essential and consequently less needed in general. One of the victims of such thinking is the cultural sector, which, as mentioned before, receives very little financial support from the European Union and its Member States.

Clearly, the EU's approach towards the cultural sector revolves around monetisation of the industry. Support towards European cinema, arts and creative industries is motivated by creating more job opportunities, and reaching new, bigger and more international markets and audiences (European Union, n.d.). Even though the European Union seems to understand the importance of cultural and creative sectors in creating and sustaining a shared sense of European identity, they are mainly centred

around the potential economic wealth they might create (European Union, n.d.b). Having such a strong focus on generating profits makes those who do not contribute enough appear less valuable, both economically and in terms of general importance. Cultural happenings and activities, however, are not always about creating job vacancies, growth, self-development and discovery. Sometimes, taking part in cultural activities is just about being able to have fun, switch off, connect with others and relax. Unfortunately, since we live in a capitalist world that focuses so heavily on productivity, connecting with others does not seem to have value in itself.

The majority of our members were under the impression that both the European Union and their local governments were not treating their centres and the cultural sector as a priority in any way. This was particularly visible in the way the emergency funds were allocated, as the cultural sector seemed to be mostly omitted. Even though there was a general understanding of why most of the money was administered towards other sectors, the decision to leave cultural centres with little or no financial support seemed to be proof that the sector was seen as unimportant.

'There are no support measures for us in any way.'

TEH member, Italy

'The city hall didn't open any grants for this year. Other funders asked for the money back. All the money is put into healthcare. Sponsorship, marketing expenditures have been cut.'

TEH member, Romania

'Project budgets are heavily affected. City will probably cut a lot of its cultural budget.'

TEH member, Cyprus

'Except for general tax returns there are no special cultural policies for Covid-19 in Azerbaijan.'

TEH associate, Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, respondents to the survey pointed out that there is a need for a shift in thinking about the professions related to culture and arts. One member pointed out how important it is for the public to realise that creating and doing art should not be seen as something that can be done in free time and free of charge. In fact, what grassroots cultural centres need is a permanent team and financial stability.

'We would like to present culture in such a way that we do not have to do art only in our free time and at our own expense. We want to defend our work and we want to show that the cultural centre is about a stable team that is well paid for its work.'

TEH member, Slovakia

'To show society that the culture field is very important specially during the crisis, to bring out the freelancers of the field and support their cause.'

TEH member, Lithuania

According to members, the real issue is in the unseen link between wellbeing, health and cultural activity. Some members saw the crisis as an opportunity to legitimise their existence and prove how much they contribute to social development; to show that audiences truly benefit from cultural activity; the content the cultural centres produce is valuable; and that this must finally be recognised by the potential grant holders, local governments and the European Union.

'Culture contributes to social development and we must be recognised.'

TEH member, Spain

'A focus on the content our centre creates and audiences and how they benefit from the culture at this time, that also needs to be emphasized.'

TEH member, Kosovo

'Position culture as being essential e.g., positive impact on health, economy... what will culture contribute to in rebuilding our societies after the crisis – a lot!'

TEH member, United Kingdom

'Crisis creates a chance to legitimise our existence.'

TEH member, The Netherlands

'Show how important arts and culture have been during lockdown, e.g. people turning to streaming, buying books.'

TEH member, Ireland

The crisis and subsequent behaviour of the local governments and the European Union made our members and associates feel uncertain about the future. If the situation of the cultural sector stays unchanged, many have been wondering what will happen to them, the artists, the freelancers, the cultural centres and the sector. If their work and efforts continue to be underfunded after the crisis is over, it might be that many will not survive and will be forced to close down. Making grant holders realise this possibility should be a priority. Moreover, there were fears about what the European Union might allocate their money towards in the future, after the crisis is over. Specifically, one of the members expressed concerns over the possibility of prioritising the mainstream industries and live streaming instead of supporting the survival of independent and non-mainstream institutions.

'The biggest challenge is that we share the problem for tax money: when people and companies don't work anymore, then there will be cuts in the budget, cuts in funding 2021, 2022, 2023. Fear is that culture is going to be part of those cuts: our parts are already so small and barely visible and the whole system is run by small amounts of money.'

TEH member, Sweden

'Champion of the creative and cultural sector because it will need more support than ever after the crisis. Challenge perceptions around cultural values, push cultural values at the forefront of people's minds... Highlighting that the sector

could be CLOSE to extinction (like some animals).'

TEH member, United Kingdom

'The unemployment system will be damaged. We can't see what will happen in future for now, but we will know more from August on. Culture will be the last priority.'

TEH member, Switzerland

'The worst scenario for the future, for next year, is that all the money from the EU will go to live-streaming (not even performances), and this will be horrible. It is now under pressure, but independent solutions need to be kept alive. Even big institutions are under threat: even Metropolitan will live-stream more than produce. Small, independent is even more provocative and they will be destroyed. We will go back into more conservative, mainstream institutional art.'

TEH associate, Greece

The situation facing the cultural sector is a vicious circle. The value the grassroots cultural centres create is not recognised, thus they receive very limited financial support. In consequence, the sector doesn't have enough means to produce more content and successfully advocate for its own importance. The crisis has created an environment where this dynamic cannot be ignored any longer. The contribution of the cultural sector must be finally acknowledged or else many of the organisations might not survive. It would be a huge shame if we only realised how much culture contributes to our well-being and social development after many of the centres have closed down.

ADVOCACY

Advocacy has its roots in the Latin *advocatus*, a noun derivative from the past participle of *advocāre*, which means 'to summon, call to one's aid' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Historically, the origins of advocacy date back to ancient Greece and Rome, where reputable orators would write orations or act as advocates specifically for pleading someone's cause (Culture and Creativity, 2018). Today, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'to advocate' is defined as 'to support or argue for (a cause, policy, etc.)' or 'to act as an advocate for someone or something' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Even though lobbying is seen as a type of advocacy, there is a significant difference between the first and the latter. While advocacy involves identifying, embracing and promoting a cause at large, one is lobbying with the purpose of influencing a politician, public official, specific legislation or executive actions. Although every non-governmental organisation can engage in advocacy, non-profit lobbying activities are mostly defined and guided by delegated bodies (Peoria, 2017; Advocacy and Communication Solutions, n.d.).

It is important that the advocacy work is not only carried out by a representative as a (political) leader or designated organisation but also by the group of interest themselves. It is too often the case that decisions are made without the involvement of the

representatives. Consequently, many of the recommendations, policies, laws and such like are made based on what the decision-makers think is the best without taking into consideration what those who are impacted might truly need and want.

According to members and associates of Trans Europe Halles, their local governments and the European Union are neither listening to the cultural sector nor involving the people from the industry in the decision-making as much as they should. Consequently, the majority of the grassroots cultural centres have expressed the burning need to advocate and lobby for their needs and wants. Our members were very aware of the losing game that culture has been forced to play. They see their sector as misunderstood, unimportant, underfunded and taken for granted.

Hence, most of the grassroots cultural centres have been very outspoken about the fact that the cultural sector needs a substantial amount of advocacy work. According to our members, this advocacy should be mainly focused on making both the public and private investors aware of the value, importance and essential role culture is playing in people's lives, including its positive influence on personal well-being. Additionally, many talked about the need to highlight the unseen usefulness and the practicality of the cultural sector including:

'Being the advocate for the value of the arts and how arts translate into practice and also personal wellbeing.'

TEH member, United Kingdom

'The role of advocacy and lobbying is important for carrying on the identity of cultural centres, supporting our usefulness at the European level, activating training processes, having a support fund for spaces in difficulty.'

TEH member, Italy

'We should be brave to lift our relevance and go to the policymakers and say that they can't ignore us anymore.'

TEH member, Finland

'Strong lobby to strengthen the relevance of culture among all other activities/sectors that might priority for politics.'

TEH member, Luxembourg

The majority of the grassroots cultural centres recognised the importance, potential and positive outcomes in being politically engaged and being more involved in policy-making at both the local and European levels. In particular, they recognised the strength of togetherness and acting collectively, including collaborating with other civil society organisations and networks similar to Trans Europe Halles. They thought that, by acting together as a group, the sector would have more opportunities to be heard, treated seriously and consequently to be successful. Moreover, while some wanted to be represented in the political scene, others wanted to learn how to advocate for their own wants and needs.

'Where most members come from, they critically look at how society develops, and there is more urgency to get together and make statements and be active on the political stage.'

TEH member, The Netherlands

'Lobbying and advocacy are important and hopefully, TEH and us can work together: European level and advocacy for the sector and spaces.'

TEH associate, The Netherlands

'We need to be very present in vision making places in Brussels.'

TEH member, Cyprus

'Social, political and environmental issues are important. Each cultural venue has social responsibilities. Be politically active.'

TEH associate, Ukraine

The time of the crisis has only served to highlight how fragile the cultural sector is. The majority of TEH members and associates were worried about their financial stability and the survival of their organisations. Having little to no savings and receiving very little attention and financial support has only proved how much recognition and financial aid the sector really needs. The majority of members wanted the efforts to be focused on convincing the European Union to allocate more money to culture, especially during the crisis. Additionally, future efforts should include advocacy and lobbying for more funding and tax exemptions for artistic productions in general, especially during and after the crisis.

'At the same time, putting pressure on those in power on more funds for the physical forms of performing arts, in order to survive.'

TEH member, Greece

'More pressure on the European community, also to obtain direct funding from the European Commission, pressure also on the governance of individual countries.'

TEH member, Italy

'To lobby for tax exemptions for artistic productions in general.'

TEH member, Germany

Even though the majority of the cultural centres spoke about the importance of reaching and influencing the European Union and European Commission, many voiced the need to be supported locally and regionally as well. This would include taking a closer look at regional and local policies, influencing local governments or supporting negotiations with the municipalities. Respondents believed that the municipalities, authorities and funders needed support in acknowledging the importance of the event and culture industry. Our members also thought that there was an urgent need for the European Union to be informed about local challenges so that the real needs and wants could be addressed and consequently translated into EU policies.

'Perhaps an attempt to penetrate local cultural policies. Promotion not only within the EU but also within one state, the local context.'

TEH associate, Slovakia

'To connect local communities to EU policies in new ways. What are the local challenges for spaces, for cities? How can we translate those in the direction of EU policy?'

TEH member, The Netherlands

'We need some support in our negotiations with the municipality. Some statements about our importance.'

TEH member, Denmark

Advocacy work can bring about real outcomes, especially when done collectively. The pressure created by Culture Action Europe resulted in a budget top-up for Creative Culture (an increase from €1.64 billion to €2.2 billion). Still, this is €600 million less than was advocated for. In fact, it is not nearly enough. Additionally, as visible in the table below, it is a rather small cash infusion compared to other programmes such as Horizon Europe. Only two programmes received less than Creative Culture (European Commission, 2020). Money is important. Nonetheless, even if culture received more funds, it would not magically fix all the issues within the sector. There is a significant need to change the concept of what culture is, but also to change the structural settings, working conditions and status of artists and cultural professionals. Common standards are a must, even if it is a huge challenge, as this is the only way to improve the livelihoods of millions of artists (Polivtseva, 2021). Consequently, advocacy work must continue, both at the local and at the European level, and the grassroots cultural centres must be included in the process. In the end, nobody knows better than them what the sector truly needs.

NOT EVERYTHING THAT COUNTS CAN BE COUNTED

At the time of writing, we are slowly coming out of lockdown, even though new restrictions are being introduced every day as new variants are discovered. At the moment, there is general consensus on the opinion that we will have to learn to live with Covid-19 without needing extreme measures of isolation and lockdown anymore. This is good news for humanity but what does that mean for us in the cultural sector?

To answer that question, let's take an existential look at our network? Let's ask ourselves: *Who are we? What matters? And why does it matter what matters?* First, let's ask *who are we?*

We are Trans Europe Halles, a European network of grassroots cultural centres. More specifically, we are urbanites in different sizes, shapes and forms, as the chart below shows:

TYPE OF LOCATIONS

Rural

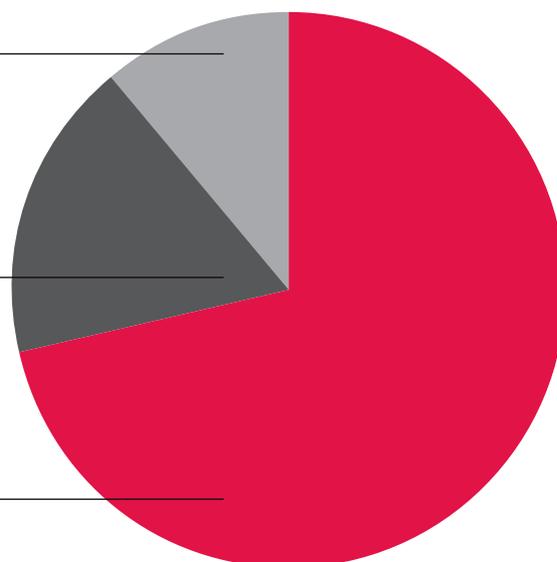
11,1 %

Urban

17,5 %

Urban Central

71,4 %



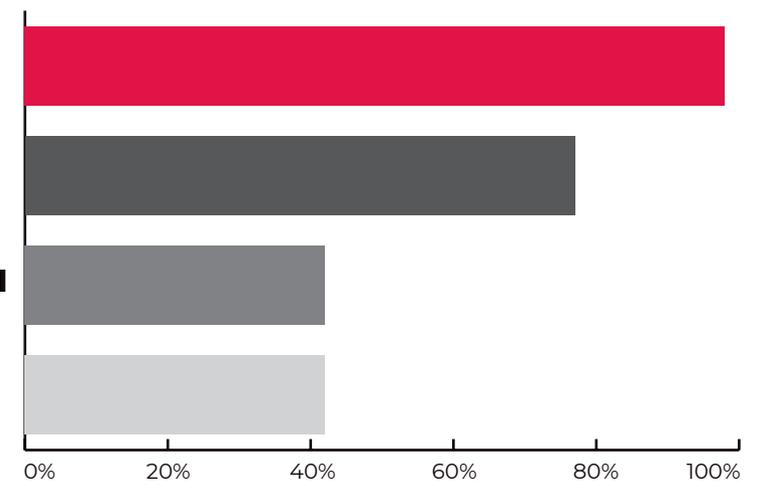
TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

Artistic

Social

Entrepreneurial

Other



SIZE (M2)	TURNOVER	PEOPLE
TOTAL: 473, 979.00	TOTAL: €68, 042 958.00	ARTISTS: 2245
AVERAGE: 8, 172.05	AVERAGE: €1, 173 154.45	VOLUNTEERS: 1835
MAX: 100, 000.00	MEDIAN: €316, 594.00	FULL-TIME: 974
MIN: 100.00	MAX: €16, 000 000.00	PART-TIME: 565
	MIN: €15, 000.00	FREELANCERS: 704

What matters for us is as follows (extracted from the interviews)

1. CONNECTING	2. KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE	3. ADVOCATING
Easier and more efficient	Consultancy	Use strength of the network
Meetings	Crisis handling management tools	Value of culture
Help collaborate	Creating databases with information	Policy-making
Match-making	Provide information	

Why does 'what matters' matter? is not an easy question to answer by using a few tables or sentences. We didn't specifically address this question with our members in our research. That being said, we can say that 'the why' is mostly about feelings, ideas, beliefs and values. We do have a vision statement that represent some of those things. To understand our 'why', we can look at our vision statement:

'EVERYONE THRIVES IN AN EQUAL, FREE AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY WHERE CULTURE, ARTS AND CREATIVITY HAVE A TRANSFORMATIVE POWER.'

In our vision statement, four points are striking. If TEH were a person, this person:

- 1. Would like to enable other people**
- 2. Wants things to change in society (in a certain way)**
- 3. Cares about the role of culture, arts and creativity in society**
- 4. Believes culture, arts and creativity can play a powerful role.**

It is a strong statement. Probably 90 per cent of cultural organisations in Europe have similar strong vision statements. The big question is, How do WE get there? And that means 'we' in the most inclusive way. 'We' as in artists, producers, audiences, policy-makers, local politicians who like arts and so on. Everyone is in the same boat.

A book by Julian Meyrick, Robert Phiddian and Tully Barnett (2020) provides some answers about how to get there. We'd like to share two striking thoughts on how to talk and advocate for culture and arts from their book *What matters? Talking value in Australian culture*. Thought number one is potentially very unpopular for policy-makers 'Not everything that counts can be counted'. The reality that not everything counts can be counted is lost in the push to reduce the variety of culture down to bureaucratic formulae claiming to demonstrate that excellence (or innovation or access etc.) has been achieved (Meyrick, Phiddian & Barnett, 2020).

Their second thought is even bigger: '*It is time to imagine a (post-) Functionalist society*'. In functionalist systems, the value of things is equated with the useful effects they produce, with their practical contribution to a differentiated social order: with their function. Functionalism provides many benefits, especially material ones. Some, perhaps even many, things suit such a substitutive approach. But some things do not, and functionalism is particularly bad for culture. Here we need an alternative evaluative strategy, one that is not simply another method of counting but a different way of seeing and understanding, built around different operational principles. So, what might these be? A central pillar must be the purpose. To look at things and people in terms of their purpose is to cast them in a wider frame of reference than just consideration of their

useful effects. Thus, we attend to their aims, missions, visions and hopes – their whole 'world': all factors that are left out of a functionalist approach to value (Meyrick, Phiddian & Barnett, 2020).

Another inspiring example is from a panel we attended. At the end of 2020, we took part in a panel for one of our projects, Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies (DISCE). Panellists were discussing the role of culture and arts in our current social and political systems. Then, one of the panellists (from Italy) addressed a question to the audience: Do you know who was advising the decision-makers in the 15th century? A loud answer from the audience followed: artists. She followed up with another question: Do you know who advises decision-makers today? She answered her own question: 'economists'.

To change this, we don't need to invent a time-machine, nor do we need to feel nostalgic about the glorious past of the arts. What we can do is help each other out, sometimes in small steps or sometimes just by being there for each other. We did that during the peak of the pandemic and it worked. We organised the Shared Recovery Programme from October 2020 until June 2021. The core idea was to create a space for peers to support each other. In the end, three work groups were created to work on three topics: Digital programming; Teams/organisational development; and Funding/advocacy. Many members helped each other. Once again, it proved to us that imagination needs connection. The results of the recovery programme reminds us of a quote from Meyrick's book:

'Excellence doesn't always mean success. Sometimes it means trying really hard and failing, then trying again, failing a bit more, and getting better.' (Meyrick, Phiddian & Barnett, 2020).

The quote above was submitted by an artist to the Australian 2015 Senate Inquiry into cuts in arts funding. Our situation in Europe is very similar. To quote a European artist, Samuel Beckett, we should 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better'. We could fail in the process, but process matters and we matter for doing what we do. Either calling ourselves artists, producers, managers, technicians or whatever. We are here for the 'art of it'. Let's reflect more on the art of things. The art of living, the art of working, the art of producing, the art of performing, the art of accounting, the art of emailing, the art of networking, the art of connecting ...

We would like to finish with a quote that particularly resonated with us:

'WE spend our entire lives WORKING to perfect our craft, so that we can give something to our fellow humans ways that only art can: it is crucial for our collective emotional and psychological wellbeing.' (Meyrick, Phiddian & Barnett, 2020)

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