Recentring Cultural Infrastructure as Vectors of Social Cohesion and Sustainable Development in Cameroon

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Abstract

Various art forms, such as theatre, film, painting, sculpture, music, and others, influence society by instilling positive values, raising awareness on pertinent issues confronting their lives, changing opinions, communicating ideas to reform society, empowering individuals economically, and fostering social cohesion. However, the paucity of cultural infrastructure in Cameroon underscores the disregard for this important sector by policymakers and stakeholders, at a time when Cameroonian society is in dire need of alternative and inclusive avenues for social dialogue. Also, previous studies have failed to shed light on the socio-economic benefits of cultural infrastructure in a pluralistic society like Cameroon and on how such infrastructure could help mend specific socio-political fissures, such as political, ethnic, and linguistic divides. Drawing on a broad review of the literature and international policy documents, this paper examines the state of cultural policy and cultural infrastructure in Cameroon and proposes strategies to improve their quantity and quality. Major findings indicate that cultural infrastructure, such as performance spaces, film halls, museums, and exhibition halls, benefits society in several ways, including job creation and economic development, identity creation that fosters social cohesion and reduces conflict, and sustainable development through innovation. This means that the culture and creative industries constitute a very important sector in Cameroon, and policymakers need to make deliberate efforts to create an enabling environment for this sector to thrive.

Key Words: Cultural Infrastructure, Social Cohesion, Sustainable Development, Recentring.

Introduction

Arts and Culture, and the creative industry in general, are largely underestimated in Cameroon socially, politically, and economically. This

is despite the important role the sector can play in enhancing sustainable development and social cohesion, and in supporting fair, democratic, and respectful dialogue between communities. The local cultural sector depends heavily on international institutions and suffers from a lack of government support. Physical cultural infrastructure is sparse, comprising fewer than 10 movie theatres across the country and fewer than 12 museums nationwide, such that most performances and exhibitions take place in cultural centres of diplomatic missions, such as the French Cultural Centre and the Goethe Institute. This means that cultural spaces for artistic expression are completely absent outside the country's main cities. Given the important role cultural and artistic expressions play in economic development and social cohesion, it is important to explore cultural policy strategies to strengthen Cameroonian cultural infrastructure and enable more Cameroonian artists and cultural actors to express their craft more freely.

The justification here is that artists use creativity, lateral thinking, and intuition to explore, reshape, test, and challenge reality; thus, they greatly contribute to the necessary processes that lead to societal transformation and social cohesion. The potentialities of the different forms of art to foster social cohesion also make art a guarantor of sustainable development, for there can be no sustainable development without social cohesion. Dielman (2008) highlights this as he posits that, "sustainability is indeed interesting for the arts as it deals with exploring new ways of living, new products and new systems and new views and concepts of man, society and nature." Dielman's position becomes even more cogent when observed from the "wellbeing" angle, a perspective that focuses on the psycho-social state of individuals in the society and how it impacts their capacity to participate in development processes. Many other researchers have researched the contributions of different art forms to wellbeing, social cohesion, and societal transformation. Talking specifically about film, some researchers describe how its narrative and

representational aspects make it a unique form of art, while the collective experience of viewing it renders it a distinct leisure activity. As Uhrig (2005) posits:

> The unique properties of attending the cinema can have decisively positive effects on mental health. Cinema attendance can have independent and robust effects on mental wellbeing because visual stimulation can cue a range of emotions, and the collective experience of these emotions through the cinema provides a safe environment in which to experience roles and emotions, we might not otherwise be free to experience. The collective nature of the narrative and visual stimulation makes the experience enjoyable and controlled, thereby offering benefits beyond mere visual stimulation. Moreover, the cinema is unique in that it is a highly accessible social art form, the participation in which generally cuts across economic lines. At the same time, attending the cinema allows for the exercise of personal preferences and the human need for distinction. In a nutshell, cinema attendance can be both a personally expressive experience, good fun, and therapeutic at the same time. (p.7)

The above assertion elucidates the benefits of theatre-going to individuals. Worthy of note here is that Uhrig does not discuss film viewing in general, which can take place even on a mobile phone nowadays, but emphasizes theatre-going because of the specific conditions the theatre experience offers the audience. This further emphasizes the necessity of cultural infrastructure such as movie theatres, museums, and other cultural institutions, even at a time when digital consumption of art forms is rapidly gaining ground.

Furthermore, several art forms also serve as mass media, thereby constituting effective avenues for sensitization and mass education. Besides other interactive roles played by schools, travel, reading, and other social activities in the cultural renaissance, the intelligent and efficient assistance of the mass media is also needed to pass down culture from one generation to the next. "Mass media" here thus refers not only to all the means of communication on a large scale like radio, television,

newspapers, journals, and billboards, but also to film, theatre, music, dance, and other artistic/cultural manifestations often referred to by sociologists as "instruments of parallel education" (Keles, 2015; Loader, 2024).

Although film and Television constitute the most popular forms of entertainment today, owing to their permeability through digital spaces, a situation that greatly reduces the raison d'être of physical spaces for their exploitation, it is important to advocate for more physical cultural infrastructure for a number of reasons. The first is the socializing factor of physical cultural spaces, which has proven to have very positive effects on society, such as the deconstruction of ethnic, racial, and class stereotypes and the enhancement of social cohesion (Aol, 2024; Reabcinschii, 2025). This is coupled with the second argument about other forms of art, such as opera and theatre, whose real benefits cannot be obtained through digital or virtual consumption patterns. Investing in cultural infrastructure will thus create a more effective means of film consumption and offer spaces for other art forms, such as theatre and music, both of which are very beneficial to society. This paper thus sets out to highlight the importance of public policies that facilitate the creation of cultural infrastructure/art spaces that support the creation and consumption of various art forms at the community level, and to point out the potential impact of such spaces as vectors of social cohesion, economic growth, and sustainable development.

I.   The Economics of Cultural Infrastructure

Filmmaking is a viable economic activity. In the United States and Nigeria, for example, filmmaking is the second-highest employer after the government (Ukadike,1994). Given that filmmaking is a collaborative effort, it brings together many professionals, not only in the film sector like cinematographers, technicians, designers, actors, etc, but also from other sectors like music, decoration, engineering, information technology,

creative writing and even the military; as well as any other fields in which expertise could be needed depending on the peculiarities of the film project. This offers numerous, diverse employment opportunities, thereby reducing unemployment in a given society. The UK House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, for example, in a report on The British Film Industry, stated that:

> Of the 23 million people who visited the UK in 2001 — spending approximately £11.3 billion — Visit Britain (formerly the British Tourist Authority) estimates that approximately 20% visited the UK because of the way it is portrayed in films or on television. The flow-on effect from film (i.e., the use of services and purchase of goods by the industry) is thought to be that for every £1 spent on film, there is a £1.50 benefit to the economy. (p.6)

The convergent nature of film drives consumption across multiple channels. In 2002, combined DVD and Blu-Ray sales in the United States, Canada, and the European Union alone were US$32.5 billion, amounting to over 1.1 billion units sold (Vikas Shah, 2021). When one considers revenues and audience figures from those who consume digitally, via television, repeat-view content they already own, and films viewed through the highly illegal but vast black market, the figures become truly staggering. In Cameroon, where internet coverage and access are estimated at 18% (UNESCO, 2021), there is still room for physical spaces for the arts to thrive, such as theatres and museums. Although revenue figures may not be as high as in Europe and North America, such infrastructure will not only create jobs and promote social cohesion but also contribute considerably to the country's economic growth.

Creative industries, through strategic cultural infrastructure, can improve the liveability and living conditions in poorer communities while making cities more competitive. This is because culture-led redevelopment of urban areas, and public spaces in particular, has proven able to preserve the social fabric, improve economic returns, and

increase competitiveness, giving impetus to a diversity of intangible cultural heritage practices as well as other creative expressions, thereby creating sustainable urban spaces (Schneider, 2024; Chapain, 2015).

In Cameroon, cities like Bamenda, Buea, Douala, and Limbe have benefited significantly over the years from the creative industries. Today, Buea is popularly known as the Silicon Valley of Cameroon due to the high concentration of digital hubs in the town, which have popularised digital marketing and communication among youths, offering them new lines of employment and avenues for creativity. Over 70% of filmmakers, musicians, music producers, and videographers also live and work in the aforementioned towns, attracting many tourists and generating significant cash flow through arts projects, concerts, festivals, and symposia. Despite these potentialities, there is still an acute need for cultural infrastructure to support the exhibition and exploitation of the numerous works produced. Film projections, musical concerts, and festivals are still done in hotels, conference halls, etc., spaces that are not well adapted for such activities. Furthermore, there are no specific cultural manifestations in adapted spaces that can help individuals incorporate art consumption into their leisure time. This has greatly reduced the capacity of Cameroon's creative industries to contribute commensurately to the country's economic growth. It is therefore primordial for the Cameroonian government to factor in cultural industries and the creative economy as part of their much-hyped Vision 2035 development program. This is because the creative economies sector, through cultural infrastructure, goes beyond physical development to incorporate non-tangible aspects of development, such as psycho-social well-being and social cohesion. That is why the next section examines the contributions of cultural infrastructure to social cohesion.

II. Cultural Infrastructure and Social Cohesion

Cultural infrastructure provides spaces for creative expression, performing functions similar to those of the mass media, such as

disseminating information, providing education, entertaining, and fostering culture. Cultural and artistic manifestations have persuasive power for social influence. Therefore, they have the potential to play an important role as a medium of entertainment, information, and education, and as a catalyst for social change. Through audio-visual formats such as films, theatre, music, opera, or historical presentations, cultural spaces can create an impact that no other medium can match, especially given their tendency to attract large audiences from all levels of society. Due to the reality element, films, for example, have a psychological impact on viewers. The extent of reality that can be presented in these spaces is thus far greater than that of television or any other medium. Their language is universal, which helps break social and cultural barriers. Therefore, media experts and development communicators believe that cultural infrastructure is the most effective mass medium in poorer countries with low literacy, where people cannot afford other media such as print or television due to economic constraints. In India, for example, feature films are produced in several Indian languages and provide a viable alternative for entertainment. By so doing, the mass production and distribution of message systems transforms selected private perspectives into broad public perspectives and brings the mass public into existence.

By bringing people of different backgrounds and social classes together and enabling them to have shared experiences, arts and culture become elements that promote social cohesion. They also generate ideas and feelings, providing a context for individuals to develop their own personalities and gain a better understanding of others in their communities. This is a key factor when it comes to social cohesion in communities because violence often erupts from a limited understanding of each other between community actors. This is why it is necessary to look beyond the economic dimensions of culture and the creative industries to encompass issues of identity creation, the social and

community effects of cultural/artistic expressions, intangible heritage, language, and related matters. Cultural infrastructure thus becomes spaces for the creation and reaffirmation of individual and collective identity through identification with media/historical characters.

This is why Erikson argues that the link between identification and identity is most crucial during adolescence, when identification shifts from parents to peers, and a more stable personal identity is formed. Kilborn further posits that viewers feel especially close to characters when the latter are going through times of stress, drama, or crisis, and the degree of involvement is such that one might even suggest that viewers -in the grip of such feelings- are undergoing a form of catharsis. He even claims that viewers can derive therapeutic benefit from this form of emotional indulgence.

Given that social cohesion is ensured when there is a sense of shared identity within communities, cultural infrastructure becomes a civic space for social dialogue, helping reduce violence and promote social cohesion. Cultural and artistic spaces, in essence, bind communities together by constituting some of the few spaces for shared activities and experiences. These shared activities and experiences enable community members to become more aware of the issues that unite them than those that separate them.

III. Cultural Infrastructure and Sustainable Development

The culture industry is understood as a key driver of sustainable development, particularly through employment opportunities, poverty reduction, and economic development in local communities. At the international level, UNESCO has carried out a series of policy brainstorming sessions over the years, which notably led to the formulation and adoption of the SDGs. UNESCO's principal perspective is that of the culture industry as an 'enabler' and a 'driver' of sustainability (UNESCO, 1995, 2024). Consequently, the way

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sustainable development is understood in this paper goes beyond the pre-MDGs and pro-environmental perspective as "development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the chances of future generations to meet their own needs" (UNESCO, 1987 "Brundtland Report"); to encompass the post SDGs understanding that development projects are appreciated and appropriated by beneficiaries along cultural lines. Hence, what is development for some is not development for others because views on development are intertwined with values and preferences. Consequently, development initiatives and processes must be consultative rather than prescriptive.

It is also worth noting that, in the context of this paper, sustainable espouses a pro-SDGs approach that factors in the role of the arts and creative industries in general in enhancing cultural expressions and economic development. This aligns with the WCCD report, which established a link between cultural policy and sustainable development and connected the arts and culture industry to a range of economic, political, and societal issues. In the above report, culture:

> …was seen as having two roles: first, an instrumental role to promote economic progress, to integrate as an important dimension across all policy domains, and to add a cultural lens to all policy decisions; and second, a constituent role as a desirable end in itself, the characteristic of civilization that gives meaning to existence (WCCD 8).

As highlighted by the WCCD report above, the arts and culture sector promotes economic progress and provides a cultural lens to policy decisions. But how exactly does the art and culture sector achieve this? To better comprehend why it is necessary to factor in the arts and culture sector in policy decisions on development, this question is worth answering. First of all, the arts and culture sector is innovative (Müller, Rammer, & Trüby), and this innovation differs from that observed in more traditional sectors such as science and technology. This is because the creative industries, for example, are strongly involved in social

communication and development of 'meaning', thereby becoming significant contributors to the broader innovation system. In particular, they play an important role on the consumer or demand side in shaping preferences and facilitating the adoption and ongoing retention of new ideas and technologies from the rest of the economy (Walter van Andel, Sofie Jacobs, Annick Schramme). Innovation in the creative industries is thus often a form of 'hidden innovation':

> 'The conventional thinking about innovation doesn't capture what actually happens in the creative industries ... The problem is two-ways. People who talk about innovation tend to ignore what happens in the creative industries; and the creative industries tend to downplay the benefits of innovation' (Howkins 18).

This multifaceted impact of the creative industries is evident in the contributions these industries make to the economic, social, and cultural development of society, and traditional quantitative macroeconomic indicators and methodologies seem insufficient to assess the true impact of the various creative sectors. However, according to the UNDP Creative Economy 2013 Report compiled by Jonathan Vickery, three dimensions can be distinguished for the measurement of the (economic) impacts of these industries: a primary direct economic impact, a secondary symbolic impact, and tertiary economic consequences of productivity in the creative industries, which the report refers to as the positive externalities, or spill over effects.

To better understand the nature and effects of these spill-overs, let's do a brief overview of Chapain et al, who inventoried a typology of spill-overs from the creative industries, in which they distinguished knowledge, product, and network spill-overs. According to them, knowledge spillovers occur when new ideas and, sometimes, technologies developed by the creative industries are applied effectively in other sectors without compensation. This knowledge also manifests itself in the high mobility of workers in the creative industries. Product spillovers occur when

creative goods and services are adapted to different markets or when they increase demand for complementary goods in other sectors. The specific nature of the creative industries means that their outputs are often an important value-adding resource or input for other industries. Typical examples include the outputs of creative business services, such as advertising, architecture, and design. Network spill-overs, on the other hand, can develop in various ways. Given that our society and economy are becoming increasingly 'networked' due to globalization and rising communication among individuals, network spillovers also make an important contribution to the local economy. For example, the presence of creative companies and the formation of clusters in a particular place offer advantages to other local businesses. These different types of spillovers provide a preliminary framework for assessing the innovative contribution of the creative industries in a specific country or region.

This section has outlined the contributions of the creative industries as key drivers for sustainable development, notably in terms of employment opportunities, poverty reduction, and the economic development of local communities. The UNESCO perspective has been brought into focus, as it views culture as a lens through which development policy initiatives should be examined. The innovative qualities of the creative industries have also been highlighted, as sustainable development aligns with innovation. The above highlights had the objective of drawing attention to the importance of physical cultural infrastructure in our communities, as it enables the creative industries to exercise and optimise their contributions to societal growth. This is why the last section of this work is dedicated to the possible cultural policy strategies for cultural infrastructure in Cameroon.

IV. Cultural Policy Strategies for Cultural Infrastructure in Cameroon

The main task of Cultural Policy is to create and support structures that promote the mobilisation of artistic creativity and the people who

operationalise it, the artists and others, thus ensuring welfare, innovation, and pluralism (Schneider, W & Daniel, G). In light of the foregoing, this section aims to highlight cultural policy strategies that could create an enabling framework in Cameroon for the development of cultural infrastructure to promote the mobilization of artistic creativity. Schneider also highlights two other pertinent issues relative to cultural policy formulation and implementation. The first issue is the need to go beyond physical structures to include organizational structures that bring together "the people who operationalise creativity, the artists and others" (2). This means that public cultural policies need to include provisions for the organisation of artists and other stakeholders in the creative sector, such as investors and distributors. Unfortunately, cultural policy strategies in Cameroon remain in the embryonic stage, with efforts concentrated on organising different artistic disciplines, without any consideration of other strategic stakeholders, such as private investors, distribution structures, and networks.

The second issue raised by Schneider is that of ensuring welfare, innovation, and pluralism. In Cameroon, a bicultural creative economy system comprising the Anglo-Saxon and the francophone systems, with clear, distinct systems of organisation, creative methodologies, copyrighting, and international funding and distribution networks, is most visible in the film sector. Although the country is made up of anglophones and francophones in distinct regions, creatives' adherence to the Anglo-Saxon and francophone systems is not strictly aligned with the corresponding regions or linguistic divides. This has led to a situation in which some francophones follow the Anglo-Saxon system, while some anglophones follow the francophone system. This means that, in terms of artists' organisations, there is a need for two separate national federations, tailored to the principles and precepts of the two systems in practice, and a confederation that brings the two federations together. However, the ongoing organisational efforts by Cameroon's Ministry of

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Arts and Culture completely ignore this bicultural system, insisting on a single national arts and culture federation despite repeated reminders from the Anglo-Saxons.

Given that cultural policy formulation in Cameroon remains an ongoing process and is currently expressed through a series of laws and decrees, it is necessary here to draw on a few international cultural policy documents. The objective is to highlight areas from which Cameroon could draw inspiration in its cultural policy formulation process so as to stay within international norms.

The World Conference on Cultural Policies-MONDIACULT, for example, which took place in Mexico City between 26th July and 6th August 1982, set down the working basis for cultural policies governing the various actions of international bodies and state governments in subsequent years. Organised by UNESCO, the resolutions of this conference, referred to as "The Mexico Declaration," established the clear link between culture and development by stating that balanced development can only be ensured by making cultural factors an integral part of the strategies designed to achieve it. This could be implemented in Cameroon by adopting a cultural policy that promotes the creation of both physical and organizational cultural infrastructure, the protection of artists' rights, and the respect for the country's cultural diversity. This will create an enabling environment for the culture and creative industries to contribute meaningfully to economic development by creating employment, improving livelihoods, and enhancing social cohesion.

Another international policy document to draw inspiration from is the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. In 2005, UNESCO took a step forward toward the adoption of the above convention, which entered into force on 18th March after being ratified by 30 Member States. In this convention, cultural expressions are defined as:

> "...the different expressions of the creativity of individuals and social groups. These expressions include those transmitted by words (literature, stories, etc.), sound (music, etc.), images (photographs, films, etc.), in any medium (print, audio-visual, digital, etc.), action (dance, theatre, etc.), or object (sculpture, pictures, etc.) p.3.

As noted above, the diversity of cultural expressions takes centre stage and should be interpreted beyond artistic forms to include the languages and cultures of expression. This is why the specific objectives of the UNESCO 2005 document included, amongst others, to create the conditions which allow the cultures to expand and freely interact so that they can mutually enrich each other; and to recognise the specific nature of these cultural activities, assets and services as bearers of identity, values and meaning.

Another international policy document that can inform cultural policy formulation in Cameroon is the 'Funding Culture, Managing the Risks' paper, which constitutes the resolutions of a UNESCO-organized symposium in Paris, from May 16 to 17, 2010. As part of its commitment to studying and promoting the relationship between culture and development, UNESCO organised this two-day symposium to analyse and address perceptions of risk in funding cultural and creative sectors in developing economies. It was realised that despite the culture's great potential for socioeconomic development and poverty reduction, it continues to be left to one side in development programmes and policies. This situation is compounded by the sector's lack of access to funding, particularly in developing countries. The general belief is that investments in the creative sector are risky.

In Cameroon, the creative industries sector suffers from an acute lack of funding. Given the primordial role that culture and the creative industry play in economic growth and social cohesion, the Cameroon government should consider incentive policies to stimulate funding for Cameroon's creative economy. This could include tax cuts for national and

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multinational companies that fund cultural and artistic projects in the country. Special funds could also be set up in specific government agencies to stimulate the creative economy. The overarching argument here is that the arts and culture industry, along with other cultural, creative, and artistic activities, can make a significant contribution to sustainable development if the right conditions are put in place. The main question was, how can cultural policies contribute to sustainable development trajectories? The answer, as outlined so far, lies in a cultural policy that includes culture and creative industries in sustainable development strategies.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the culture and creative industries as change agents who stimulate, guide, or facilitate sustainability. The paper has also demonstrated that bringing individuals from different socio-political backgrounds together to participate in shared experiences such as film screenings, concerts, etc., helps individuals in the community understand themselves better and become aware of what unites them, thereby promoting social cohesion. This is in contrast with other key change agents in sustainability, such as politics, science, and consultants, who often fall short in stimulating sustainability because they are too analytical, work more within existing boundaries and functional rationality, and are less touching upon emotions, intuitions, or visions:

> Sciences are important in analyzing problems but have fewer capacities to contribute to sustainability that is basically a process of the creation of a new world with new institutions, products, processes and relationships. They fall short due to the analytical rationality they apply in understanding reality. Science cuts reality in parts and this is not an appropriate approach to deal with a complex issue such as sustainability. Politics fall short for many reasons. They are too much embedded in traditional institutions like nations states that have problems dealing with continental, global or multi-cultural issues. They are too much problem-oriented, very

analytical in their approach as well, and over-emphasize a functional rationality (Dieleman 2)

It is with this understanding of the intrinsic qualities of the arts, culture, and creative industry to reshape society and contribute to sustainable development processes that this paper argues for a cultural policy in Cameroon that puts in place strategies to develop both physical and structural cultural infrastructure in the country, as well as a system that ensures the funding of the creative economy. While physical cultural infrastructure refers to cultural spaces such as theatres and museums, structural infrastructure includes artists' federations and syndicates, funding associations, and public agencies that promote the creative industries.

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