ARTICLE

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts, culture, and heritage sectors in the African Union member states

Angela Martins* and Vicensia Shule

African Union, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
*Corresponding author. Email: MartinsA@africa-union.org

Introduction

Africa as a continent has been hit by the coronavirus – the COVID-19 pandemic – as have many parts of the world. Many African Union (AU) member states were badly hit by the virus, while others were only mildly impacted. The arts, culture, and heritage sectors have been severely hit by the pandemic. Fortunately, in many countries in Africa, arts, culture, and heritage were placed at the heart of strategic priorities at the national, regional, and continental levels of combating COVID-19.

Artists have made a major effort to accompany citizens during the period of confinement with messages of hope in their songs. During the virtual forum of ministers responsible for arts, culture, and heritage, on their responses to COVID-19, Amira Elfadil, commissioner for social affairs in the African Union Commission (AUC), informed the meeting about the Africa day commemoration that was celebrated by the AUC through a virtual solidarity concert aimed at raising awareness of COVID-19 and mobilizing resources for the AUC’s Anti COVID-19 Response Fund. The involvement of musicians in the virtual concert was a solemn contribution to the fight against the pandemic on the continent.

The pandemic has also claimed the lives of significant art, culture, and heritage figures such as the Guinean vocalist and kora harp player Mory Kanté (1950–2020), the Cameroonian musician and songwriter Emmanuel N’Djoké, known as Manu Dibango (1933–2020), the king of Congolese soukous music Aurlus Mabele (1953–2020), and many more.

The cultural sector in Africa creates jobs and represents a source of income for the majority of the youth it employs. Being an essential employment sector in many of the AU member states, its protections against the impact of COVID-19 have become necessary and important. This article reflects on the impact of the pandemic on arts, culture, and heritage institutions in the AU member states and strategies and initiatives put in place in combating the pandemic. Most of the information in this article has come from the report on the African Union Member States Ministers’ Virtual Forum on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Arts, Culture and Heritage Sectors, which was held on 27 May 2020.

Impact of COVID-19 on the arts, culture, and heritage sector

COVID-19 has had a negative impact on all sectors of the economy, but, more importantly, the arts, culture, and heritage sector has been badly affected by the necessity for social

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the International Cultural Property Society.
remoteness. Most of the activities related to the arts, culture, and heritage sectors involve physical contact; hence, the suspension of gatherings has affected almost every individual in the sector. The actual impact of COVID-19 in many countries in the arts, culture, and heritage sectors has not been calculated. But some countries have done preliminary studies to evaluate the impact of COVID-19.

Given the prevailing health situation, some member states have had to cancel cultural and artistic activities including concerts, fairs, and exhibitions. Cinemas, tourist sites, museums, and archaeological sites have also been closed. Hence, cultural and creative industries have been negatively affected by the closure of sites, resulting in loss of revenue, the postponement of some planned festivals, and a ban on artistic mobility.

AU member states' initiatives to curb the impact of COVID-19 on the arts, culture, and heritage sectors

Every AU member state has used various approaches and schemes to curb the impact of the pandemic. For example, the Cameroonian government has used artistic and cultural activities to raise awareness of COVID-19. Additionally, the Cameroonian government has put in place systems to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, including systems to defer payments as well as setting aside supporting funds for the practitioners of creative sectors.

The existing labor laws in Algeria provide exceptional rules in situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The law provides means for cultural workers, artists, and actors to improve their employment and social security contracts. The existing system of universal security without discrimination of gender, religion, or other differences, which offers one scheme for salaried workers and another for self-employed workers, has managed to sustain people in the arts, culture, and heritage sectors. Cultural workers in Algeria are covered under such schemes depending on their status.

Mali also has assisted cultural workers in terms of rescuing the sector during this difficult period. The government has contributed two million dollars, reinforced copyright laws, and provided food to artists in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the first cases of COVID-19 were reported, the Tunisian government established a cultural fund to support cultural actors for a period of three months. The essence of the fund was to support the restructuring of the sector. In addition, the cultural policy provided a strategy to support start-ups in transition to digital arts and culture products and services.

Rwanda cancelled all cultural and artistic events due to the pandemic, and it was necessary to encourage digital trade where artists could exhibit their products or even sell them outside the country and the continent. The process included the development of platforms to enable the digital market to take place. The initiative went hand in hand with the improvement of its policies regarding intellectual property rights.

Kenya closed all cultural centers so as to slow the spread of COVID-19. This created a significant loss in income for art practitioners in the arts, culture, and heritage sectors. The president of Kenya put in place various initiatives including a relief fund of one hundred million shillings, which is equivalent to one million dollars to support cultural and creative industries.

Zimbabwe set mitigation plans for cultural and creative industries, including the provision of funds amounting to twenty million dollars for artists and athletes, a relief fund for youth in small and medium enterprises, and a social welfare fund that provides monthly allowances for artists. The establishment of the online digital platforms for artists and athletes was created to enable artists to continue with conversations in various projects included in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Resiliart Project. The country is also preparing for post COVID-19 activities including the activation of
an Arts Development Fund facility, the establishment of a Social Security Scheme as well as setting up a well-equipped and user-friendly online platform for creative workers.

In order to ensure resilience in all fields, including that of culture, the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire set aside a Support Fund for Actors in the Informal Sector, which amounts to 150 billion Cote d’Ivoire francs. Moreover, the Institut National Supérieur des Arts et de l’Action Culturelle has developed online training, which has made it possible to maintain both practical and theoretical training for students.

In Chad, the government has initiated a series of cultural programs on the national television channel. The government has released more than thirty million francs to revive the cultural sector with a view to helping young people and women. The Copyright Office has also allocated some funds so as to support artists.

To limit the impact of the pandemic in Mozambique, support measures were put in place including the collection of data to assess the impact of the pandemic. The government also developed a program called Arte no Quintal, which is aimed at assisting cultural workers to continue producing and disseminating art mainly through virtual musical concerts during the pandemic.

In Egypt, all museums and archeological sites were closed and sanitized as a mechanism to contain the spread of COVID-19. The process of sanitization went hand in hand with the training of respective workers such as tour guides on how to manage sites the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, Egypt was in the process of designing a digital platform that will allow online visits to museums and archaeological sites from the comfort of people’s homes. The process will also include the digitization of electronic tickets to limit physical contact. For tourism establishments and other sectors affected by COVID-19, Egypt has proposed government tax relief.

Opportunities

Some sectors, however, have experienced significant growth during the pandemic. These include the increased demand for certain products by the confined population, especially the distribution of online content. With regard to the dissemination of such works, the digital sector has been privileged, and local languages have been used in the process of such dissemination.

The arrival of COVID-19 has shown that there is a need to improve financing strategies to enable the arts, culture, and heritage sectors to access markets. This includes the strengthening of e-business mechanisms including the establishment of an inter-African payment system.

One of the deliberations during the African Union Member States Ministers’ Virtual Forum on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Arts, Culture and Heritage Sectors was to advocate for artists, actors, and musicians to continue to produce arts and culture in a creative way that is resilient to the pandemic. The suggestion was to use of online/virtual and television platforms for music concerts, fashion and design shows, visual arts webinars, cultural and creative industry hubs, amongst others.

The pandemic has been an opportunity for the sector to reorganize and regain momentum. Fashion and design industries benefited through the manufacturing of local masks. In addition, artists, especially musicians and actors, have participated in various awareness-raising activities against the spread of the pandemic in local languages.

There is a need to experiment and document traditional ways of combating COVID-19, which many societies have already used. The alternative medicine industries have proposed various preventive and curative formulas and products against COVID-19 based on local therapeutic knowledge.
There is a need to encourage various financiers to support the arts sector to digitize works of art and cultural sites and make them available on digital platforms. Such digital platforms will enable artists to share their work and directly reach their audiences. The idea of creating charitable organizations to support artists and cultural sectors is of prime importance.

It is important to seize the opportunity offered by COVID-19 to collectively develop the African economy through arts, culture, and heritage. It is crucial to think about the post-COVID-19 era with the advent of a new economy that will foresee and include teleworking in Africa. The year 2021 has been declared by the AU as the Year of Arts, Culture, and Heritage, which presents an excellent opportunity to mobilize cultural workers to embark on the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery measures using the arts, culture, and heritage sectors as a strong and powerful tool.

**Conclusion**

Until there is universal vaccination and protection against COVID-19, there is a need to strengthen advocacy and awareness-raising activities. Many countries have embarked on various initiatives to support the arts, culture, and heritage sectors to recover from the pandemic. Many economies have been affected and will continue to be affected by the pandemic. Hence, it is critical that cultural and creative industries are used to support the recovery of African economies in the post-COVID-19 era.

Because of the enormous experience in fighting against COVID-19, the continent has to develop a new way of thinking that will influence the global perception about the continent and identify opportunities that the prevailing situation presents for the arts, culture, and heritage sectors. There is a need for AU member states to be proactive in defending the arts and culture and to give the creative sector and arts professionals the tools they need, including the development of strong and implementable cultural policies.

---