

INTERVIEW WITH

EMILIA SAIZ:

“LEAVING NO ONE

AND NO PLACE

BEHIND; THE ROLE

OF CULTURE IN

SHAPING

THE FUTURE”

The Culture Summit of the UCLG is a unique event to guarantee the place of culture in global debates on sustainable development and to encourage networking, peer-learning and the sharing of good practices between cities and local governments from across the world. The fourth Culture Summit was hosted by the City of İzmir between September 9-11, 2021. Before the event we talked to Emilia Saiz, the Secretary General of UCLG, about the role and program of the UCLG on culture and sustainable development, as well as her expectations from the upcoming Summit.



Emilia Saiz

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UCLG has long been working for achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda through the localization of Sustainable Development Goals. How would you comment on the UCLG’s role on the achievement of local and regional governments so far as we have entered the decade of action for Sustainable Development Goals? Do you feel that there is a better understanding of cultural activities and local governmental responsibilities since you have started your work?

Local and regional sustainable policy-making has been critical to preserve our communities’ safety, linking health systems, public services

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and the universal development agendas during this time, and I believe the past years especially have been incredibly positive for UCLG in regards to the representation of its members in the international sphere, but also into how we see ourselves as a movement, and in how we have renewed our strategy to put our communities at the center of decision-making, adopting peace; health; and intergenerational dialogues at the core of our efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major turning point towards the renewal of culture as an essential component for the recovery and to build back better. The pandemic has shown the profound need that our communities have for culture and has also made evident the interrelation and interdependence of cultural policies with policies related to education, gender equity, health, inequalities, urban planning, public spaces, accessibility and technology, among others.

We believe that culture is starting to be seen as an integral response to many challenges, and local and regional governments, with cultural organisations and civic society, continue to make efforts to reinforcing transversal actions and advocacy on culture as a fundamental dimension of sustainable development.

The ecological crisis, addressing inequalities and leading the way to the recovery in the post COVID-19 era were reflected as strategic priorities at the 2020 UCLG World Council. The Council has also paved the way for the “Pact for the Future”. What are your expectations from the Pact, especially with reference to UCLG’s motto of “leaving no one and no place behind”?

In our transition from social distancing to a world driven by communities the lessons learned during the pandemic, which have come from the shared experiences from our leadership, are the ones that need to pave the way for this “Pact for the Future”.

We envision the Pact as made up by three axes: people, planet, and government, to respond to the critical social, environmental, and governance challenges of our time, deepened with the COVID-19 crisis, deepens the democratic processes and contributes to the transformation of cities and territories. The Pact will include a set of necessary actions that promoters (political and social stakeholders) will promote as a means to take responsibility towards future generations, bringing to life our UCLG Decalogue for the post COVID-19 era.

- A *Pact for People* means ensuring that the sacrifices made now will reflect on a better life for future generations. This axis is based upon the Universal Development Agenda, and the defence of the rights of our communities will be at the core of our strategy.
- The *Pact for the Planet* will be the global commitment to the necessary global ecological transition, especially in view of the renewed threats that we are facing. From our position as a municipal movement, we will contribute to raising the ambition of our efforts to tackle the climate emergency and contribute to the sustainability and resilience of our planet.
- The *Pact for Government and Democracy* is the step that needs to be taken to ensure that our communities at the core of the decision-making mechanisms, building peace and prosperity from our cities and our regions, and aiming to renew the multilateral system to ensure the next generation of multilateralism by the time the UN turns 100.

The Culture Committee of the UCLG is particularly dedicated to promote the role of culture in sustainable development. Growing number of cities and local governments adhere to the Agenda 21 for Culture, which aims to set a basis for cities and local governments to foster cultural development. COVID-19 pandemic has blocked the cultural life all over the world

and workers in the cultural sector were among those who were most negatively affected. What challenges has the COVID-19 pandemic brought and what has been the response of UCLG, especially in the field of culture? Why is culture important in the recovery period?

The pandemic has put, from our point of view, the need to also changed the cultural dimension of development. On the one hand, it has shown the profound need for culture: people have turned to culture to reinforce the sense of belonging in communities and cities, inventing new forms of participation, recognizing what unites us and creating new meanings and solidarity.

On the other hand, the pandemic has also shown the interrelationship between cultural policies and policies related to education, gender equity, health, inequalities, urban planning, public spaces and innovation. Last but not least, the crisis has shown that protection systems for cultural workers are precarious and need to be improved around the world.

It is clear to us that this crisis we are facing cannot be addressed by health or economic measures alone, but that we must appeal to the creativity of communities, through culture as an antidote to the effects of the pandemic. It is an indisputable part of the solution to humanity's problems, as our Decalogue for the COVID-19 era states, and also identifies culture as a major component in the recovery and as a key element to address inequalities by developing programs on heritage, creativity, and diversity, and implementing cultural rights at the local level.

Connected with the prior question, what does Rome Charter offer in terms of right to city, cultural rights and human rights?

The Rome Charter sees culture as the expression of values, a common, renewable resource in which we meet one another, learn what can

unite us and how to engage with differences in a shared space.

The Charter allows us to think about and reaffirm the social value of culture: a view of culture in which people, not profits, are its heart and purpose. We cannot yet say what that might mean in the world that is now emerging, but that is perhaps the beauty of it: we can develop a new conception of culture, shaped by the situation and the people who contribute.

I think this is what is most exciting about the Charter: it brings to the table the need to protect the cultural rights of all and, in doing so, it calls on the need to bring the perspectives of all people when discovering and developing cultural policies: it calls on governments to consider the cultural dimension in education, in planning, and in how we interact with each other, by calling to acknowledge cultural diversity and heritages as renewable resources to be enjoyed by all.

UCLG Women has been working hard for promoting participation of women in local decision-making and advocating gender-sensitive local governance. Can we learn more about the works of the UCLG Women and future perspective?

Our equality-driven movement has always unequivocally championed gender equality as essential. These past years we have already set in motion concrete actions to make the voice of women and girls heard in the localization of global agendas.

In face of the COVID-19 pandemic, UCLG stressed the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and girls. Us women, we have been at the frontline of the battle against the virus, exposing ourselves to take care and protect our people, in our homes, schools and hospitals; in our cities and territories.

Women in politics face several barriers, impediments and attacks in their journey to ac-

cess and perform in public positions. Social norms and discrimination pervade all stages of our public life, in the house, when engaging our communities, in elections and even inside governments and parliaments. We need to ensure that measures are put in place to protect women from gender violence, discrimination and disinformation worldwide, including in the virtual world.

The local leaders that are a part of our movement are committed to equality as the only possible pathway. A pathway that places care at the top of the political and all agendas. An agenda that includes an equality framework in urban planning, in legislation and development.

Culture Summits of the UCLG have been the main discussion forum of cities and local governments on the role of culture on sustainable development at local level. The UCLG's decision to hold the culture summits in different parts of the world is also remarkable in enhancing the messages of the UCLG worldwide. Izmir is the city of the 2021 UCLG Culture Summit. What are your expectations from the Summit? Which issues do you think should be addressed ?

The UCLG Culture Summit is the main global meeting point for cities, local governments and key stakeholders committed to the effective implementation of policies and programs on culture and sustainability. This year, 2021, the Summit takes place in an exceptional context.

We have never before faced a global pandemic together. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of basic services, the urgency of making vaccines available in every corner of the world, and the need to focus our societies on care.

The themes that we hope are explored are, naturally, those that the current crisis is asking us to address: Humanity needs to renew its relationship with nature, talk about scien-

tific research and evidence, on the time and resources we devote to cooperation and solidarity, on our ability to heal the wounds of the past, on our desire to build creative cities and societies. All of these issues have always had an immense relationship with our work, as well as with the past editions of the Summit, and we are sure that Izmir will be the place to find collective answers to these questions.

Finally, what would be the contribution of Izmir as the host of the Culture Summit and what would be the gains for the city?

Izmir is and has always been a crossroads of people and ideas. A place to meet, discuss and imagine the future. Izmir has played this role mainly in the Mediterranean basin in the 20th century, and I believe Izmir is ready to play this role at a global level in this 21st century. It is not by chance that the UCLG Culture Summit takes place in Izmir! The city gains global recognition, certainly, and it also gains capacity: we expect a substantial participation of actors from Izmir in our Summit, so that we can mutually learn and progress together. I want to highlight that the Declaration of Izmir, to be presented at the end of the Summit, is understood as a direct contribution to our Pact for the Future.