

# Cultural Players in Regional Development Processes

## Roles of Facilitating Agents and Dialogue Meetings

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Over the past 10 or 15 years the cultural sphere has acquired a more and more distinct role in European regional policy. During the previous budget period for the EU Structural Funds (2000–2006), between 5 and 10% of the total budget went to cultural projects. In a study prepared for the European Commission and presented in the autumn of 2006, the cultural sector is viewed as one of the most rapidly expanding branches of economic activity for the future<sup>1</sup>. Culture and heritage are highlighted, not only as resources for creating economic growth but also as aspects that have instrumental importance, e.g. in work relating to integration, public health, and democracy.

When culture is highlighted as a resource in other policy fields as well (fields such as economic growth, regional and urban development, health), it often means providing temporary financial resources to the cultural sector. One of the consequences is that cultural projects are initiated and implemented regardless of whether or not established cultural life participates. At the same time, however, considerable turbulence occurs because, in order to gain a share of the funding, players in the cultural sector have to act in other arenas and decision-making environments than the traditional contexts of cultural policy.

A new type of logic in funding cultural activities is thereby being created, where as previous studies<sup>2</sup> have pointed out, it is important to have creative, artistic and/or heritage-related competence actively participate in order to secure the cultural quality of the end product. Cultural players need to take part in a negotiating game, in which they both co-operate and compete for resources with players from other sectors. The regional policy field is often unfamiliar to cultural operators, while the other players are unfamiliar with cultural policy and do not easily understand the specific conditions of cultural activity.

### The role of facilitating agents in policy networks

In such partnership negotiations, none of the individual parties has enough capacity, knowledge, and experience to move developments forward single-handedly. Local and regional networks become necessary for the implementation of policy, and reference is made to “policy networks”. The challenge in urban and regional governance is to develop ways for political decision-making arenas to interact with free-standing platforms offering a place for creativity, experimentation, knowledge production, and an open dialogue.

Politicians, officials, businesses, and the civil society are now participating in the game under essentially changed conditions, with traditional power balances shifting, new

players entering the scene, and some confusion with regard to roles, mandates, and powers. This means new intersectoral co-operation that transcends boundaries between sectors, political party boundaries, and different types of agents. Moving from wishes and ambitions to practical action, however, is easier said than done, and difficulties arise in the encounters between the different regulatory systems, professional cultures, and policy traditions which different parties bring with them to the negotiations. Sometimes they also campaign for different values, different interests, and have different assessments of the situation as well as different ideas of how the objectives are to be achieved.

Issues highlighted in partnerships for urban and regional development are often located on the margins of each partner’s regular activity, but can at the same time represent a central problem in society: for example in the revitalisation of an old industrial heritage site, or the use of urban public space. Many parties are affected by, and can see new opportunities in such regeneration issues, while at the same time none of the involved partners has a mandate or the capacity to take on the task single-handedly. In such situations, there is obviously a role to be played by an independent facilitating agent. This agent provides a platform for identification of needs, possibilities, and challenges, and acts as a bridge between partners as well as between the operative level and the strategic/policy-making level.

The Foundation for the Culture of the Future (Sfk)<sup>3</sup> has played a role as a facilitating agent in local and regional development processes that involved cultural issues, by supporting and co-organising Dialogue meetings between leading politicians, officials, researchers, artists, and cultural operators. In such facilitation, issues and challenges, context and partners involved are identified together with local or regional stakeholders. The background can generally be described in terms of communication problems between the players involved and illuminating matters that have come to a deadlock. The objectives of a Dialogue

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1 The Economy of Culture in Europe ([http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/sources\\_info/studies/economy\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/sources_info/studies/economy_en.html))

2 E.g. “Evaluation of the Framework Programme The Cultural Heritage of the Industrial Society in Västernorrland 2000–2006”, chapter in “När historien ger framtidstro – Industrisamhällets kulturarv i Regional Omvandling” (2006), [www.iska.nu](http://www.iska.nu)

3 Stiftelsen framtidens kultur, a Swedish foundation supporting innovative culture, founded by the Swedish government in 1994

meeting include shedding light on issues that concern everyone involved and opening up the communication between actors, who do not meet on a regular basis, and sometimes have not even met each other before. Practical organisation and arrangements are carried out by a local co-organiser, while the role of Sfk is to be a catalyst for the organisation of meetings, actively involved in the preparation and implementation of meetings, but also a link between the internal, local/regional actors and external organisations and experts.

#### **Example 1: Creative enterprise, culture and regional development in Halland**

One Dialogue meeting was organised with the Halland Region, situated between two growth regions, Göteborg and Malmö/Copenhagen. Halland today has a high net immigration rate, but came low on Richard Florida's ranking list of Sweden's most "creative regions"<sup>4</sup>. What does this imply in practice? Can a region's creativity be quantified? How can culture be a part of regional development? What are important pre-considerations for choosing to settle in a region like Halland? How can Halland develop its unique environmental and cultural assets? Which enterprises and people does it want to see moving to Halland? These were some of the questions which the region's politicians were invited to discuss.

The dialogue meeting began with a number of representatives of the "creative class" describing why they had chosen to go on living in Halland or chosen to move back to Halland, after living in San Francisco, New York, Berlin, London, Stockholm and Göteborg (Gothenburg). Researchers from a group at Gothenburg University, which collaborates with Florida's research group, also provided input. The dialogue circled around ways in which the region can use its cultural heritage as a resource for regional development, utilising and underpinning the assets which cultural life can contribute. The dialogue created a growing interest on the part of the region's politicians and officials in questions concerning the importance of culture for regional development and growth. And as a direct result of the meeting the regional organisation for the preservation, safeguarding and enhancement of the cultural heritage – Kulturmiljö Halland (Cultural Heritage Halland) – was invited to join the county task force on regional growth.

Two of the participants in the meeting, an art director and a photographer, took the initiative to hold a follow-up Dialogue meeting on an industrial heritage building,

Gerlachs Hallar, which is one of the oldest remaining industrial buildings in Varberg, a town in Halland. Today, the premises are empty and for some years now an intensive discussion has been in progress on what to do with the property. A number of players, cultural workers mainly, have suggested that the factory environment could be adapted to different kinds of creative activity. A group of committed persons from widely different areas of Varberg's cultural life have developed a proposal for turning the place into a creative centre where public cultural activity is integrated with commercially-run creative enterprises.

The example of Gerlachs Hallar is interesting because the issue had deadlocked politically. Many local players found it difficult to see that the proposal required innovative thinking on how to provide premises for creative enterprise and organise and finance cultural activity. The discussion had bogged down in positions on the issue of whether or not to refurbish and transform the building into a cultural centre. One faction said the municipality needed a new cultural centre, while the other maintained that the expense was unaffordable and the building should be demolished to make way for new housing. Nobody seemed to take the integrated hybrid proposal presented by the task force seriously.

The Dialogue meeting about Gerlachs Hallar was held in the recently vacated factory premises in a provisional "meeting room" arranged by putting a few forgotten desks and chairs together. The event was prepared together with a network of both artists and entrepreneurs. This is particularly interesting, because innovative and transboundary cultural activities today often operate in a border zone with new roles and emphases, which the surrounding community has difficulty in understanding. Operators of such activities search for alternative ways of organising and funding, since existing supportive structures, both within the cultural sector and outside it, are often incompatible with actual needs and preferences.

Besides studying the obvious potential of this exciting industrial heritage site, the intention of the meeting was to discuss art, culture, and creative enterprise. In what way can society help to create a supportive infrastructural base for both cultural activities and business development? How would the different parties benefit from representatives of both areas assembling under the same roof?

Many entrepreneurs in cultural enterprises accepted the invitation to participate with great interest, with several international operators among them in the areas of shoe fashions, furniture design, and music production. Gert

<sup>4</sup> Florida, R. Tinagli, I., 2004, EUROPE IN THE CREATIVE AGE; Carnegie in cooperation with DEMOS

Wingårdh, a highly regarded Swedish architect opened the meeting by presenting examples of industrial buildings transformed into new uses. Next, a number of the invited business actors described their companies and expressed their positive views on the proposal for turning the place into a creative centre, and the advantages of relocating their business to a place where they could integrate with cultural operators and activities. The dialogue opened up communications between the different factions, and started a process to relax the political deadlock.

### **Example 2: Cultural operators and activities in urban regeneration in Gothenburg**

Since early 2005, an experimental public participation scheme entitled Dialog Södra Älvstranden has been in progress in Gothenburg, aimed at generating ideas and creating interest in the city's development in connection with a dockside area, the Southern River Bank, that is being closed to heavy motor traffic, which opens up possibilities of restoring the city's contact with the water.

One early concern of politicians was the issue of engaging cultural workers as an adjunct to the process, the background being that the area concerned already has several cultural institutions and a large number of active artists. A series of lectures, dialogues, workshops, and exhibitions took place, with a bearing on urban regeneration. The City Museum served as node and arena for direct encounters between the general public, public authorities, researchers, artists, and politicians. This part of the process can be viewed as an innovative model for democracy and civic participation in which various artistic methods – the building of impressionistic models, role play and other expedients – were employed. Several artists played an active part in the process. The role played by the museum is also interesting, given the discussions taking place in recent years concerning museums as active community agents and arenas for public dialogue.

A Dialogue meeting was initiated by Sfk together with the Urban Laboratory Gothenburg, ULG<sup>5</sup>, with the intention of exploring the role of cultural operators in urban development processes. Instead of looking at the rather general "role of culture in the city", the Dialogue meeting focused on ways in which artistic modes of expression could be used in processes of renewal and development of a place. What roles and responsibilities can museums, artists and other cultural agents assume in connection with urban development work? Can the involvement of artists

facilitate public participation by offering unorthodox means of communication, which can be better employed by groups of citizens who feel uncomfortable with the regular urban planning terminology and instruments? Can cultural events contribute to raising awareness of issues in urban design and development?

The Dialogue meeting was an opportunity for leading politicians and high officials from the City of Gothenburg, active artists, and cultural debaters to share different ideas. The City Museum is now considering permanently instituting a "dialogue room" on urban development in which history and the future can meet continuously, and where exhibitions, meetings and dialogues can be organised concerning the continuing future transformations of the city. Another example of cultural negotiation in this arena is that of Teater Spira, a science theatre, which involves other parties, young persons mainly, in the dialogue concerning urban development using theatrical means.

### **Conclusions**

These two examples show how a facilitating agent can catalyse a process and bridge gaps between different stakeholders in complex policy networks, by opening up communication, providing a platform for open dialogue, and fostering new or improved relations between the actors involved. What are the success factors, the conditions that make it possible for the facilitating agent to contribute in a positive way?

Firstly, there is the approach and the role taken by the facilitating agent. The agent can neither be a stakeholder in the process nor act in favour of a certain outcome of the process. Furthermore, the agent acts on a temporary basis and takes responsibility only for catalysing the Dialogue meeting and for the success of the communication at the meeting. The agent takes no long-term responsibility beyond the meeting.

Secondly, the dialogue meeting should not be regarded as a negotiation or a business meeting, but a forum which offers the participants new insights into each others' realities, views, and perspectives. The size of the meeting is important, with a few invited persons, ideally around 10–15 at a time. The discussions are not recorded, which makes it easier for the participants to speak more openly and contribute to a dialogue free of considerations of prestige. The location and character of the meeting venue should stimulate all the senses, and defuse the participants' usual positions. Discussions and social gatherings during meals and coffee breaks are as important as the actual meeting.

<sup>5</sup> ULG is a platform for knowledge and action in urban development, managed in cooperation between the City of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of Technology

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The very strong basis on a current local or regional matter, a "hot issue", which at the same time illustrates an issue of more general interest, is another key to success; for example, including the topic of a derelict industrial building and its future in the general discussion on the relation between creative enterprise, cultural activities, and regional development, or discussing an urban development plan in terms of the exploration of cultural operators as agents in urban governance.

Lastly, there is the issue of mutual respect. One player may have experience and knowledge which others lack, and vice versa. On one occasion, when a brief evaluation was carried out following a dialogue meeting, the following conversation took place:

"You politicians have a much tougher assignment than we imagined," said the artists.

"You artists are actually more politicians than we are," the politicians replied.

The need for facilitating agents in urban and regional development processes is obvious, in particular when stakeholders from different policy fields are involved. We argue that the role and working methods of such agents have to be recognised in urban and regional policy. However, it is not simply a matter of hiring consultants to do the work. The issue of facilitating agents and facilitating platforms has to be closely linked to the debate on democracy, transparency, and efficiency in urban and regional governance. ::

## Keeping the City Together

by Marcel Bayer

(p. 42 >) success stories appear to be extremely important in bringing about an atmosphere of hope, ambition, and initiative. Helping people to realize their ambitions and eliminating restraints and barriers is being seen as the most effective official policy.<sup>2</sup>

On the European stage as well the agendas are being set towards more attention to the urban challenges. European Commissioner for Regional Policy Danuta Hübner expressed this as follows during the *Open Days, the European Week of Regions and Cities* in October 2006 in Brussels: "More and more people understand that proximity matters in today's world; innovation and economic modernization will not become a fact of life without a bottom-up approach. Most of the resources essential for innovation – technology centres, research institutes, innovative small and medium-sized enterprises, bodies providing financing – can be found within the region. It is also there that indispensable local knowledge and expertise can be mobilized, allowing for full exploitation of growth and change potential."

The Open Days, were a great success in offering concrete illustrations of the potential of the Lisbon Strategy, and making it more tangible. More than 4,000 visitors, twice the number as the year before, attended the meetings, workshops and presentations of cities and regions, which were demonstrating their approach to the challenges for the future. ::

<sup>2</sup> VROM-council, the Netherlands Council of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. The Council is charged with advising government and parliament on the main aspects of policy on the sustainability of the environment as well as other important elements on policy relating to housing, spatial planning, and environmental management.