

The critical contribution of the city and its cultural agents to the draft of the new Agenda 21 for Culture

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During my stay in Gabrovo as an expert on Gabrovo Pilot City for the new Agenda 21 for Culture, I was able to meet and interact with a number of cultural actors and stakeholders, as well as with different City officers and their teams, all of whom were very motivated by the principles and ideas of the new Agenda 21 for Culture and eager to further develop the relationship between the City's cultural activities and its sustainable development policy, a strong engagement of the Municipality with its urban centre and many rural villages.

The City of Gabrovo is engaged in several cultural events, activities and projects that illustrate and contribute to the elaboration of the new Agenda 21 for Culture. Three examples from Gabrovo cultural life will be briefly presented, each one concerning different kinds of stakeholders around key principles of Agenda 21 for Culture: 1) The Gabrovo Carnival, a collective, inclusive and participatory event ; 2) the Bread Houses, a cultural, social, and innovative civil society initiative based on the simple act of baking bread and sparking cross-cultural dialogues; and 3) the project “Take me to the countryside”, initiated by a Gabrovo student and City supported, involving an intergenerational experience between its young urban and older villagers;

1. The City is known for its yearly Carnival, that contributes to making Gabrovo the Bulgarian Capital of Humour – a cultural, festive, and participatory extension of the City’s renowned Museum of Humour and Satire. The Carnival integrates and involves almost all the cultural stakeholders of the municipality as well as a good number of voluntary citizens of all wakes of life. It also continues to be active outside the Carnival week in May, proposing presentations, events, and open workshops all year round. It is the City of Gabrovo's biggest collective event, involving professional

and amateur artists, volunteer citizens and the city's capacity to organise sustainable events. It has a satirical creativity that strongly contributes to the identification of Gabrovo as a Capital of Humour. The representative of the carnival organisers was present at several of the meetings held during the days of the expertise and very keen on following the next steps of the new Agenda21 for Culture.

2. The Gabrovo municipality has a network of 37 community centres spread throughout the city and surrounding villages, from which a very interesting project has emerged known as the Bread Houses led by local, independent group of artists. Using some community houses as a base, a team of artistic and social actors has created a unique way of bringing different people together: socially disadvantaged, old, young, or those suffering from illness or a handicap. The idea is to invite people to learn to make bread together, bridging ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and religious divides. This in turn leads to various innovative multi-disciplinary art projects. The team is also engaged in a lively international network, “The Bread Houses Network” that has partners throughout the world, and defines its collective bread-making and accompanying art forms as sustainable ecological education. The leading, artistic team of this project had many questions to ask about the new Agenda 21 for Culture as it is totally engaged in, I would say, all four pillars of sustainable development and keen to continue developing cross cutting innovative actions

3. Gabrovo is a municipality with a specificity: an urban, central city surrounded by 130 small towns or rural villages, which has led it to develop an interactive cultural project between the urban and the rural, an interesting case study for Agenda 21 for Culture. The Municipality had been wondering what could be done about the particular urban/rural culture gap between the generations in Gabrovo, where the urbanised children of the city centre had little contact with elderly people in the rural villages and knew next to nothing of their more traditional ways of working, living, and leisure activities. It could also be said that the villagers were not in contact with

the aspirations and urban energy of the city's youth. If it began at the initiative of a student who won a competition launched by the City, it continues today as a City project in partnership with the local village cultural centers. The project consists in asking village people to act as temporary “grandparents” to a few dozen children and adolescents and to share their rural way of life with their “grandchildren”: working in the fields, looking after the animals, making butter, cooking, singing and dancing the traditional songs. The intercultural and integrational aspects of this project are part of the City’s efforts to maintain a link between tradition and modernity and the cohesion of the different generations living there. To see the young people coming down a country road singing and dancing in traditional dress while still wearing their urban sneakers is a symbol of the purpose and the success of the project – learning about one's heritage and cultural identity without renouncing the present times. Many of the “grandparents” came to a public meeting on Agenda 21 for Culture and the organizers are keen to go further in the experimentation of culture and sustainable development

Through these three brief examples, the City of Gabrovo, its cultural actors and independent artistic scene, its business sector and volunteer citizens, are contributing in their different ways to the Agenda 21 for Culture, its renewal in 2015 and subsequent development over the next years.