Managing Creative Economies as Cultural Eco-Systems
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INTRODUCTION

The effects of COVID-19 are being felt across the globe. Extending far beyond how to prevent transmission and look after the infected, the pandemic is raising fundamental questions about how economies and societies are organised in addition to the limits and possibilities of government action. For ‘creative economies’, these questions are urgent. A crisis such as COVID-19 not only creates new conditions; it also reveals what was already the case, spotlighting structural inequalities and injustices as well as unfulfilled potentials – the precariousness of creative work, the limited inclusivity and sustainability of creative economies, the uncertain effects of digital transformations and the limited scope of existing creative economy policy. As with many aspects of our socio-economic systems, the pandemic has made them more visible. Alternatively, the shock provided by COVID-19 may also make it possible to identify and take advantage of new opportunities to move towards a more sustainable future in creative economies. Crises have often been powerful push factors for accelerated socio-economic development because they can force individuals, organisations and communities to find alternative solutions when existing ones become rapidly obsolete.

These challenges and opportunities provide different and even tense narratives for the post-COVID-19 situation in creative economies. In this initial DISCE Policy Brief, we wish to address problems that already needed urgent action but attempt to do so in new ways. DISCE is a multi-disciplinary research project, which tackles the inherent tensions of creative economies by questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions of creative economies. This Policy Brief is targeted at those involved in policy design and planning to provide an overview and new insights on creative economies. Given the current stage of the DISCE research – with the majority of our data collection still to come – we will not yet make any detailed recommendations for policy makers. Instead, we will raise several questions which we hope can contribute to setting a new policy agenda.

One of the major problems is the very identity of creative economy policy. ‘Cultural’ policy has been narrowly conceived, as have conceptualisations of ‘creative economy’. One of the central contributions of DISCE is to demonstrate the ecological nature of creative economies – they operate via the interconnections and interdependencies of resources of many kinds. There is a need to explore new possibilities for mobilising public policy towards a clear strategic aim: the development of inclusive and sustainable creative economies.

The central problem addressed in this Brief, therefore, is the uncertain identity, scope and aims of creative economy policy. In light of COVID-19 – the problems it presents, the pre-existing conditions it reveals and the new possibilities it creates – we need to ask the following:

i) What is creative economy policy, and why does it matter?
ii) Who needs to be involved?
iii) What information do they need?
iv) What should they be trying to achieve?

Policy processes can be understood to involve six phases, as follows: 1) problem identification and definition, 2) agenda setting, 3) policy formulation, 4) policy legitimation, 5) policy implementation and 6) policy evaluation. Once our data collection, data analysis and policy workshops have been completed, DISCE will address aspects of all six phases. In this Brief, we are particularly concerned with the identification and definition of the problem and with agenda setting. These are arguably the most important stages of the policy process but also the ones that can be most easily overlooked. The primary contribution we make here is to name this consequential problem – the uncertain identity, scope and aims of creative economy policy – and to discuss the policy implications thereof. In doing so, we emphasise that for all the enormous suffering and loss that COVID-19 is generating, it has the potential, also, to enable new conditions for progressive change.
The findings we draw upon in this paper are of four kinds. Evidence is drawn from the following:

1) DISCE reviews of key literature
2) DISCE analysis of existing European data
3) DISCE collection of new data in our pilot case study in Enschede, Netherlands (the first of 10 case studies) and insights generated via the work of Trans Europe Halles and CUMEDIAE in stakeholder interactions
4) Primary data collection and analysis conducted by members of the DISCE team in their previous related research

**i) What is Creative Economy Policy?**

**a) A Lack of Adequate Concepts & Vocabularies**

Current approaches to creative economy are framed by problematically narrow conceptions of ‘where’ the creative economy takes place and of the nature of cultural and creative work. Our evidence reveals the absence of a working definition of ‘creative economy’ that is adequate to the lived realities of creative economies. This lack of a shared vocabulary has been further confirmed within the first stages of DISCE via our co-creation labs in Dresden and Timisoara, in which we explored and tested existing terminologies.

Fieldwork conducted by members of the DISCE team demonstrates that creative economies operate via the interconnections and interdependencies of many different kinds of (tangible and intangible) ‘cultural resources’. In addition to the multiplicity of these resources, creative economies are constituted by systemic conditions that mediate the relationships between them, with huge implications for who has access to what kinds of opportunities.

The processes through which the creative industries and the creative economy have been defined are closely connected to the specific policy purposes to which their measurement and mapping is being put. This, in combination with the evidence of the ecological nature of creative economies, demonstrates the need to develop new conceptualisations of creative economy. This includes the need to redefine creative professions and professionalism, to identify key skills such as creative adaptation and to integrate ideas of human rights and democracy into what creative economies are.

Only with the involvement of ‘practically adequate’ concepts and vocabularies can we develop the new empirical understandings and new policies able to meet the challenges of ‘cultural democracy’, the need to ‘re-future’ creative economies in the face of economic and environmental crisis and not only to ‘survive’ COVID-19, but to be able to treat it as an opportunity to ‘build back better’.

**b) The Need for an Ecological Framing of ‘Innovation’ within Creative Economy Policy**

Over the past 20 years, there has been much discussion of the creative economy as a key location for innovation. Digital technologies offer numerous opportunities for new forms of commerce in creative economies, including novel ways to reach audiences and the use of multiple business models for different audiences. Moreover, digital technologies afford opportunities for new contents, actors, collaborations and marketing methods, potentially including more effective ways to distribute cultural offerings. However, innovation is much broader than a technology-driven process. It can involve many forms of community and social innovation and the ways in which the consumer needs are taken into consideration. Innovation and opportunity recognition are important success factors, particularly during crises. What is the role of policy making at such times of crisis? Whilst innovation policies have traditionally focused on technological innovations, the blurring of boundaries between traditional industries and sectors has expanded the scope of innovation policies to all sectors, including creative economies. In the past, however, the framing of ‘innovation’ policy for the creative economy has been very narrow, not addressing the full diversity of innovation that...
takes place within creative economies – beyond the most visible (often tech-led) examples – nor addressing the question of how innovation can be both inclusive and sustainable. What is now needed is something new: not only policy that is able to support innovation within individual business practices, or focused solely on technology, but systemic innovation, an ecological approach to innovation – new ways of managing creative economies as cultural eco-systems. This has major implications for the role of policy, pointing towards systemic change and innovation in creative economy policy itself.

**ii) Who Needs to Be Involved?**

(a) The Need for More Participatory Approaches to Creative Economy Policy

Who has the power to shape creative economy policy? In Enschede and our co-creation labs, cultural and creative workers articulated their dependence on existing funders and policy makers for enabling their capabilities and framing shared narratives. Research conducted by members of the DISCE team demonstrates the need – and emerging possibilities – for more participatory approaches to leadership and governance within creative economies. This is partly a question of adequate knowledge production and how knowledge is shared. Given the interconnectedness of the many types of cultural resources through which creative economies operate, seeking to establish and operate a top-down, bird’s-eye view is implausible and inadequate to the task of effective policy making. Instead, novel approaches to participatory knowledge production and ecological governance are required. This includes the need for new ways to ‘tell the story’ of creative economies in participatory ways – as evidenced in our pilot research in Enschede. Whose responsibility is it to tell the story of the city? What kind of story is currently being told, and might there be different kinds of stories? Where and how should the story be told? And what are the consequences? When it comes to ‘developing inclusive and sustainable creative economies’, these are key questions. And, there is an important opportunity here to develop new stories and new policy processes.

(b) The Need for More Participatory Approaches to Social, Community & Digital Innovation

Creative economies can be highly fragmented, with myriad small actors and companies that do not have the resources enabling them to share and adopt the diverse innovations being developed in their environments. Pooling the know-how and ambitions of smaller-scale creative actors is essential in developing inclusivity and sustainability. Understanding creative economies as cultural ecologies, in which social, community and digital innovations take place, highlights the need to involve new actors within innovation processes, and in new ways. ‘Telling the story’ of creative economies, for the purposes of new policy and practice, must involve small-scale actors and social innovations that are often overlooked.

**iii) What Information Do They Need?**

Uncertainty is having a limited understanding of required actions and of the outcomes that can be achieved. This can be caused by information that quickly becomes out-dated and difficulties in predicting and controlling events. Uncertainty has been accelerated by COVID-19, calling even more urgently for new approaches to information gathering and decision making in creative economies.

(a) The Need for More Participatory Approaches to Knowledge Production & Mapping

‘Mapping’ the creative economy has been a central activity of policy making since the first definition of creative industries emerged. Mapping exercises are typically extremely top-down. Moreover, they too often focus on a narrow range of economic indicators – GVA and jobs. In addition to previous research conducted by members of the DISCE team, our pilot research in Enschede provides evidence of the need and possibility for more collaborative approaches to knowledge production, including novel approaches to mapping. The Enschede data also demonstrate the need to take a broad view of the range of information required to effectively inform creative economy policy making, including data regarding housing stock, health and social care systems, transport systems and the availability and costs of further and higher education, for example. Establishing an
informational basis with this breadth will require new participatory approaches to gathering those data on an ongoing basis. Moreover, given the diversity of values (such as economic, social, enjoyment, influence and harmony value)\textsuperscript{xxviii} generated within creative economies, to create value inclusively and sustainably requires new approaches to understanding what is being valued and by whom. The co-creation of value also involves a wide range of people as producers offer opportunities for value creation, but the real value is co-created within the consumer sphere.\textsuperscript{xxix}

(b) Significant Gaps in the Existing Data

DISCE’s analysis of existing data sources reveals a lack of adequate information on the conditions of employment within creative economies.\textsuperscript{xxx} Beyond measurement of the volume of ‘creative jobs’, there is little data relating to the quality of cultural and creative work. New data are needed to enable effective policy making in support of ‘good work’ within creative economies.\textsuperscript{xxxi} There are also gaps in knowledge about socio-demographic characteristics – especially nationality, ethnicity, race and socio-economic status – in relation to the creative and cultural workforce.\textsuperscript{xxxii} In terms of creative higher education provision across the EU, it is not possible, at present, to disaggregate data to the level of specific creative subjects. There are many disciplines and pedagogical approaches across the broad definition of creative education, but the currently existing data do not enable researchers and policy makers to work with the data beyond a very low level of granularity. In addition, a new classification for creative economies is desirable in the aftermath of COVID-19 and in relation to the new perspectives the recovery of the creative economies will open in the coming years. All these limitations to the existing data place significant constraints on the informational base upon which policy decisions can be made. They also highlight the need for new approaches to creative economy data collection.

iv) What Should They Be Trying to Achieve?

(a) Policies Adequate to the Wide Range of Value Creative Economies Produce

Early evidence from our pilot case study demonstrates the varieties of value creation that take place within creative economies.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} including many kinds of value beyond the dichotomy of economic and social value. This consolidates and builds upon existing evidence\textsuperscript{xxxiv} and provides new insight into the ‘ecological’ nature of value creation within creative economies.\textsuperscript{xxxv} This poses questions to policy makers as to how to develop approaches that support and promote the contribution of creative economies to GDP and employment and to a wide range of social goods. Moreover, it raises the question of how to develop policies that recognise creative economies as spaces in which expressions, experiences and contestations of value are integral to its core activities\textsuperscript{xxxvi} and policies that are able to help ‘hold open spaces and structures’\textsuperscript{xxxvii} through which these activities can flourish.

(b) Policies Adequate to an Ecological Approach to Innovation

Within an ecological understanding of creative economies, innovation takes place in many locations, involving many kinds of novelty and value. One area of innovation is within business modelling, where innovations can range from adding new activities to existing business models, to linking activities in novel ways, to changing some of the parties performing key activities in the process of value creation.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Technological advancements have enabled individuals, organisations and networks in creative economies to develop more inclusive approaches to their business models. In doing so, they have demonstrated innovations that combine elements of digital and social transformation simultaneously in ways that can ease the burden of uncertainty and realise new opportunities – working with customers and participants in new processes of value co-creation. Now is the time for policy makers to support creative economies through bold new measures able to sustain a wide range of innovation. This may involve novel approaches to the monetisation of digital activity. If there is widespread assumption of free cultural offering, this potentially leaves only limited room for more financially sustainable creative economies. Major questions need to be discussed much further with regard to digital technologies, changing consumer behaviour and the remuneration of cultural producers, for example. Therefore, a profound cultural and systemic change, accounting for changes in consumer behaviour, is needed. At the same time, it may also require actively engaging in live debates regarding new approaches to social security, providing new safety nets adequate to the age of COVID-19 and its specific challenges.
(c) Policies Specifically Addressed to Achieving Systemic Inclusivity

It is already clear that some socio-economic groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In addition to these unequally distributed negative consequences, giving new visibility to underlying structural inequalities, the pandemic has exposed the visibility and value of ‘taking care’ of each other. This requires a collective reassessment of what roles and jobs are valuable, in what ways, and how they can be justly supported and remunerated. COVID-19 has also shown cultural and creative workers to be vital to how people have connected during the crisis. This provides further evidence of the need for a new definition of creative economies – one adequate to their interconnectedness with many kinds of socio-economic activity and their embeddedness within place – and for new approaches to mapping creative economies and their value.

(d) Policies Specifically Addressed to Achieving Systemic Sustainability

In addition to the pre-existing evidence regarding the need to manage creative economies as cultural eco-systems, COVID-19 makes this even more urgent, requiring systemic change and policy interventions rather than piecemeal or small-scale support. The pandemic poses profound challenges to the sustainability of creative economies as well as creating new opportunities and capturing their value.

Without policy interventions, COVID-19 may put the financial sustainability of many cultural offerings and programmes under threat. For example, in the first month of lockdown (March 2020) alone, museums lost 80% of their income, with three out of 10 museums suspending contracts with freelance workers and three out of five entirely stopping their volunteer programmes. This means a huge loss of projects, professional skills and knowledge. Whether these will ever be replaced is uncertain as initial analysis suggests one-third of global museums will not reopen after the pandemic. As for the situation in higher education, heavy reliance on the incomes generated via international students’ fees means that many ‘creative’ programmes face enormous uncertainty. Moreover, creative courses of many kinds, which typically involve large amounts of time spent in face-to-face teaching, may be disproportionately affected by social distancing measures.

COVID-19 has resulted in the live streaming of theatre and other forms of the performing arts as a response to closures of physical spaces of creative and cultural offerings. The digitisation of cultural contents has excluded a part of the European population from such offerings and highlights the socio-economic and cultural inequality between those with Internet access and those without. This digital divide is evident among elderly, women not employed, immigrants and people with disabilities and in general among those who might be unable to use digital tools.

These digital solutions to an immediate problem are not only about creating and delivering the existing content but also about a set of interactions, social connections and experiences that take place through and around performances. It is not yet clear in what ways – and to what extent – these digital versions of live events will generate value of different kinds and how the value is being captured. At present, there is unequal access to the resources and skills needed to share and access content online; and big questions remain about how digitally provided experiences can be sustainably monetised. The public health crisis will put further strain on those with fewer digital capabilities whilst potentially enabling the further accumulation of power and wealth by technological platforms as the ultimate gatekeepers and mediators of much creative content. The early evidence of how individuals (including consumers and producers), organisations and networks within Europe’s creative economies are responding to the crisis via online practices raises very important questions for policy makers. What can and should the role of policy makers be in supporting creative economies to adjust to these new (digital) circumstances and to do so in ways that are both inclusive and sustainable?
The evidence and analysis presented above address the first two stages of the policy cycle – problem definition and identification and agenda setting. We are pleased to outline three sets of implications for policy through which to contribute to setting a new policy agenda in unleashing the potential of creative economies. We do so at a relatively early phase of the DISCE project, with the majority of our data collection still to come. At further stages of the project, once we have completed our data analysis and policy workshops, we will develop more detailed suggestions for what these implications for policy can look like in practice.

1. Creative economies should be defined, studied and understood as cultural eco-systems.

New approaches to ‘mapping’ creative economies are needed based on an ecological account of what creative economies are – in other words, approaches to mapping that do justice to the many kinds of tangible and intangible cultural resources that matter to how a creative economy functions (from arts organisations, to finance options, to the histories of a place) and the systemic conditions that mediate the interconnections between cultural resources. In DISCE, we take the approach that mapping these resources and their interconnections is a necessary but always incomplete process. We also take the position that it needs to be as inclusive as possible, involving many types of ‘actors’ and innovators (as well as innovations) in order to understand creative economies adequately.

In addition, new approaches to measuring the ‘success’ of creative economies are required. How do policy makers know if creative economies are doing well as well as what kinds of value they create and for whom? Our research demonstrates the need for a multi-dimensional approach beyond the limitations of GDP and crude employment measurements. We are developing a Cultural Development Index (CDI) to help meet this need. This will be a composite index, responsive to the breadth of factors that constitute a flourishing cultural eco-system, but with ‘openness’ built into its design so that it can be adapted and applied on a participatory basis within any eco-system in which it is applied.

To make possible these new approaches to mapping creative economies and their success, the systemic collection of new quantitative and qualitative data will be needed. Part of DISCE’s work is to identify exactly what new data are required in order to map and measure creative economies as cultural eco-systems.

2. Creative economies should be a matter of policy responsibility for wide range of agents.

The areas of policy making with an explicit responsibility for supporting the development of inclusive and sustainable creative economies need to be expanded. An important consideration here is not only the breadth of policy making domains involved (which ministries or departments have a role to play) but also questions of scale. Our ecological framing raises the question as to whether new approaches to applying the principle of subsidiarity to creative economies could be valuably developed. Across these domains and scales, new (ecological) approaches to ‘innovation’ need to be embedded with creative economy policy, including the provision of new tools and resources in support of innovation and entrepreneurialism.

Managing creative economies as cultural eco-systems requires recognising that they are embedded within wider socio-economic and institutional conditions. For example, in light of COVID-19, ideas such as a Universal Basic Income and a Universal Jobs Guarantee, previously treated as radical or peripheral, have rapidly become more central within political debate. New approaches to providing ‘social security’ will have major implications for creative economies. All those involved in creative economy policy need to actively engage with – and contribute to – these conversations even though they may appear, to some people, to be outside of the domain of ‘creative economy policy’. On the other hand, financially more sustainable creative economies require systemic change so that cultural value is not necessarily produced based on the assumption of a free cultural offering – be it online...
or physical. This is a profound systemic change also implying changes in consumer behaviour and participatory value co-creation with the consumer. Meeting these challenges will require decisions that cross several policy domains and institutions. Having clarity with regard to the identity and aims of ‘creative economy policy’ will be vital to working effectively across these multiple policy areas and institutions.

In addition to expanding the breadth of existing policy domains involved, managing creative economies as inclusive and sustainable cultural eco-systems requires expanding the range of people considered as legitimately involved in policy processes, adapting a more participatory approach to creative economy policy.

3. New and different kinds of stories of creative economies should be told to effectively communicate their challenges and opportunities.

In this short Policy Brief, we are introducing a series of elements with which to tell new stories of creative economy and of creative economy policy. We have shown what creative economies are – interconnected systems of cultural resources of many kinds; and we have highlighted how they currently work – innovative and collaborative in many ways, limited in who can be involved and marked by precarity.

However, we have also identified a potential alternative story full of opportunities to be further realised. A systemic change starting from participant and consumer behaviours and questioning the assumption of free offerings opens up avenues towards a more financially sustainable future. We have suggested what creative economies could become in the future – if systemic innovation in creative economy policy itself takes place and the creative sector becomes a serious concern of a wide range of policy makers – more inclusive, more sustainable and an important part of how Europe can ‘build back better’.

The process of storytelling, which is so central to political imagination and to shaping strategic goals for policy and systemic change, needs to be an open and collaborative process involving many different people and different kinds of stories. This Brief offers an initial summary of evidence, and a discussion of its implications, to open up a discussion of the possibilities for managing creative economies as cultural eco-systems in the future. As we take the next steps in the DISCE research, we will hear the stories of many of those involved in creative economies in 10 cities. In doing so, we look forward to synthesising new understandings of what the role of public policy can be in developing inclusive and sustainable creative economies, across Europe, in the age of COVID-19.

Finally, we are arguing that creative economies are potentially central to ‘re-futuring’ European economies. Cultural infrastructure has a crucial role to play in enabling the conditions of trust and ongoing democratic practice necessary for developing and sustaining momentum behind any of the large-scale policies required to meet the challenges of climate change. Creative economy policy makers therefore need to explicitly recognise the nature and potential of ‘cultural infrastructure’ – making the case for its significance in regard to proposals such as the European Green New Deal. It is this kind of infrastructure that makes democratic storytelling possible, imagining new ways to live together, sustainably, on a finite planet.
Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies (DISCE) asks: ‘What are inclusive and sustainable creative economies, and how can they be developed?’ This research question is addressed collaboratively via the following work packages (WPs):

WP2 – Creative economies: mapping, identification and statistics
WP3 – Creative careers: from education and skills development to inequalities and activism
WP4 – Earning logics, business modelling and innovation
WP5 – Cultural development: rethinking inclusive and sustainable ‘growth’

As discussed in the DISCE Case Study Framework,107 10 case studies of medium-sized cities are at the centre of the project’s research design. Case study research is specifically suited to investigating complex social phenomenon in which the boundaries between the phenomenon ‘itself’ and its context are unclear. This is crucial to DISCE given that one of our central concerns is the need to provide a new account of the embeddedness of creative economies within a range of places and practices beyond the prevailing – and excessively narrow – accounts of the creative economy, the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) and the cultural sector.

Across these case studies, DISCE is taking an inclusive approach to data collection, conducting interviews with participants involved in a wide range of activities within each city region. We are also employing methods deliberately designed to pay attention to the systemic conditions through which the component parts of creative economies are interconnected (or not). This includes the use of workshops, interviews and surveys tailored towards the specific goal of helping to answer DISCE’s overall research question. In these case studies, we also deliberately pay attention to multiple scales – across the micro, meso and macro – in order to understand how inclusive and sustainable creative economies are local, regional, national and European at the same time. This includes, for example, examining how European or national policy decisions effect creative economies within particular cities.

Developed in close relation to the 10 regional case studies are two other strands of work. The first is the analysis of pre-existing data pertinent to understanding European creative economies. Secondly, the DISCE team will hold a series of policy workshops and co-creation labs. Here we will share our provisional findings and explore their implications for new approaches to policy and practice in support of developing inclusive and sustainable creative economies. In doing so, we are taking a broad approach to who is (and should be) involved in policy processes, seeking to address what it would mean for the policy process itself to be inclusive and sustainable.

Alongside a series of research reports, DISCE will develop a Cultural Development Index (CDI). This will offer new ways to assess the component parts and systemic conditions of creative economies and the extent to which they are enabling the cultural capabilities of the people living within those locations. It will build on the capability approach to ‘human development’, an influential intervention in development economics now employed within many fields of research and policy.108 The capability approach expands the range of information required for assessing prospering beyond crude measures of economic growth and insists on evaluating against a ‘multidimensional’ range of indicators of what people can do and be (their capabilities). The CDI will be designed for collaborative use – as a tool of democratic practice and public reasoning – rather than as an instrument of top-down governance.

In combination, these aspects of DISCE constitute an integrated and unique research design through which to provide new understandings of what inclusive and sustainable creative economies are and how they can be developed. In doing so, via ongoing exchange with policy makers in multiple locations, DISCE seeks to contribute to the development of inclusive and sustainable creative economies not only via the published outputs of its research but through the ongoing process of the research itself.
### PROJECT IDENTITY

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<th><strong>PROJECT NAME</strong></th>
<th>Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies (DISCE)</th>
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| **CONSORTIUM**   | Culture and Media Agency Europe aisbl – CUMEDIAE – Brussels, Belgium  
|                  | Gran Sasso Science Institute – GSSI – L'Aquila, Italy  
|                  | King’s College London – KCL – London, United Kingdom  
|                  | Stockholm School of Economics in Riga – SSE Riga – Riga, Latvia  
|                  | Trans Europe Halles – TEH – Lund, Sweden  
|                  | University of Turku – UTU – Turku, Finland |
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| **BUDGET**       | EU contribution: 2 940 495 €. |
| **WEBSITE**      | [https://disce.eu/](https://disce.eu/) |
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