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## Agenda 21 for culture and Local Solidarity Governance

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# Agenda 21 for culture and Local Solidarity Governance

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## Porto Alegre and the Agenda 21 for culture

Since 2004, the Agenda 21 for culture has provided local governments with a broad and universal theoretical basis for the implementation of genuinely democratic cultural policies. In this respect, and in spite of its brevity, no other document in any other period has been able to offer public cultural administrators such a rich and wide-ranging set of suggestions and analysis.

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Historically linked to the birth of this international framework, the city of Porto Alegre rapidly turned the principles and commitments of the Agenda 21 for culture into the core of its governance. The current local authorities have maintained them, to a great extent in questions concerning the defence of the right to diversity, social inclusion and freedom of speech in addition to support for the creation of a cultural economy geared towards sustainable development.

Nonetheless, given the nature of political relations in the city, the most continuous dialogue between the local government and the Agenda 21 for culture has taken place in the field of *popular participation*. This participation can be seen in the collective mapping out of projects to meet needs in the city's outlying areas: workshops, courses, popular festivals, showing films in local neighbourhoods, street theatre, etc. These areas, which are often poor and marked by the lack of prospects for young people and the continual influx of drugs with all of their consequences, are today the biggest and most dramatic challenge facing the public authorities in Brazil.

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In addition to these key contributions, it should also be noted how the Agenda 21 for culture helped (and will help) administrators and communities to create a cultural system made up of values with multiple aesthetic and social aspects and an unmistakably humanistic meaning. Many of the local government's most effective and generous public policies were based on this document.

Nonetheless, given the nature of Agenda 21 for culture as a theoretical project to be put into practice by local governments, its members left to one side a major problem which is of particular significance for developing cities: the problem of the scanty financial resources allocated to culture. Here Porto Alegre has been looking for a solution which might eventually become a topic for debate among members from cities which are less able to invest in culture.

Perhaps we should recall that at the start of the 1990s, the *Orçamento Participativo* (Participatory Budget) was introduced in Porto Alegre and has subsequently spread to many other towns and cities worldwide. It is a consultation movement which revolved around the idea of the effective mobilisation of excluded social classes through the direct expression of their most immediate needs. The movement also helped culture to show the deficiencies and aspirations not provided for by the authorities and generated an expressive group of activities in the most outlying and problematic areas of the city.

However, there was a moment – seven or eight years ago – when the demands could no longer be met en bloc. This was due both to the increase in popular participation (and hence in the demands made of many more public services) and the cyclical crises which affect developing countries.

The impossibility of meeting the bulk of demands also reached public cultural praxis, which was fragmented into caring for the needs of the most disadvantaged and the indispensable continuity of general actions in the various fields of culture, including upkeep of buildings and facilities (theatres, libraries, museums, etc.).

## Local Solidarity Governance

The solution found to meet justifiable popular demands and the lack of financial resources was the appropriation of the concept of *Local Solidarity Governance*, originally developed in England, and its transformation into a permanent government movement.

The most continuous dialogue between the local government and the Agenda 21 for culture has taken place in the field of popular participation through the Local Solidarity Governance.

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In summary, Local Solidarity Governance means building a wide range of civic alliances and partnerships. In other words, the creation of a type of collective strength made up of communities, workers and employers' associations, mothers' associations, trade unions, churches, NGOs, private and state companies and the Government in the search for solutions to urban problems. The political concept that in a city everyone is equally responsible for daily existence and that only great cooperative efforts can solve day-to-day problems brought immediate results.

Local Solidarity Governance expanded the Participatory Budget beyond its purely re-indicative perspective. Members of the Participatory Budget not only presented their demands but also worked on how these were oriented and took part in the search for viable options for dealing with them. Thus these people ramped up their relationship with community life and have made a crucial contribution to the opening up of perspectives for solving urban problems previously seen as impossible to deal with.

In short, while abstract in origin, the concept of Local Solidarity Governance can take practical shape in the field of culture as a tool able to foster the satisfactory production, circulation, access to and use of cultural goods and thus become a practical reference point for the principles and commitments of the Agenda 21 for culture.

## An ongoing Culture Secretariat project: the Reading Houses

It was never possible to meet the longstanding popular demand for libraries in outlying districts due to the high cost of their construction and especially maintenance. Yet with the prospects opened up by the Local Solidarity Governance programme, it became possible initially to list ten very poor urban areas in which there was a demand for a minimum library facility for local residents.

As a result, a superb architectural project was drawn up (at cost price by one of the leading architects in the province, a university lecturer and connected with modernist Brazilian architectural ideas) which provided for the construction of small, extremely functional and cheap to build facilities.

At the same time, librarians from the municipal Culture Secretariat set up a basic heritage project initially consisting of three thousand works by classical and contemporary authors in the humanities, children's and young people's classics and religious and self-help books often requested by local people.

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Companies were reached to help with building what were known as Reading Houses and with buying supplies and computers. Support was surprisingly positive, as the belief in reading as entertainment, and contribution to personal development spread.

A new feature is the fact that the Reading Houses are to be managed by volunteers from each community elected by the same community with preference given to the retired and home makers. These volunteers are to receive formal training from the Culture Secretariat's team of librarians. The Secretariat will also run literary and artistic creation workshops for children, young people and senior citizens in the new facilities. In other words, a cooperation network, which has a number of protagonists who are united in a joint project for cultural inclusion, will be set up.

## The network of Reading Houses is the most relevant action we have put in place as part of Local Solidarity Governance, following the principles of the Agenda 21 for culture.

Turning this dream into an albeit modest reality is the first action we have put in place as part of Local Solidarity Governance, following the basic principles of the Agenda 21 for culture. These principles are about education and training for people, the generalisation of knowledge and learning and, above all, about enabling people to escape from poverty and alienation.

## Appendix

This article has been written to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Agenda 21 for culture. A lot of progress has been made since 2004, not only in Porto Alegre but also in other European and Ibero-American cities. The fifth anniversary is also a chance to suggest some pointers for the future:

- information about the cultural policies of cities related to the Agenda 21 for culture should be more widely spread;
- there should be an exchange programme for local government officers in charge of cultural planning; UNESCO could take on the Agenda 21 for culture and work with local governments on a specific programme for the governance of culture at a local level.

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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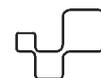
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