



# ESCH-SUR-ALZETTE, PILOT CITY FOR AGENDA 21 FOR CULTURE:

## A BRIEF ASSESSMENT

SEPTEMBER 2021



In 2017, Esch-sur-Alzette in Luxembourg was a post-industrial city in the process of regeneration with 36,000 inhabitants, a much less privileged population than the capital, facing problems related to housing, unemployment and urban planning. Moreover, in 2017, there was little communication between cultural institutions, no common goal and a lack of training for professionals in the cultural sector. Esch, however, was also a multicultural city (122 nationalities), with cultural institutions recognised in the Greater Region and notable historical heritage, benefiting from the recent creation of a campus of the University of Luxembourg. It therefore seemed logical that culture should become a strong pillar of the city's sustainable development.

At that crucial moment (2017), the city became a Pilot City for *Agenda 21 for culture*. A few months later, it adopted the country's first cultural strategy, *[Connections]*<sup>1</sup> (2017–2027) and, in late 2017, it was awarded the title of *European Capital of Culture 2022*. Between 2017 and 2020, in addition to preparing the groundwork for *Esch2022 European Capital of Culture* and implementing a rigorous cultural strategy, Esch-sur-Alzette also participated in the *Agenda 21 for culture Pilot City* programme and carried out a self-assessment (2017). It then implemented four pilot measures, made two visits to peer cities (Namur

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1 A summary (in French) of this strategy can be found here: <https://citylife.esch.lu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/02/Strategie-Culturelle-Re%CC%81sume%CC%81-FR.pdf>

and Lyon), hosted a virtual visit for peer cities (2020) and carried out a final self-assessment (2021<sup>2</sup>).

As Esch's role as a *Pilot City* comes to an end in 2021, it is possible to take stock of this particularly fruitful (and unsettled) period. This document offers, firstly, a summary of the city's actions as a *Pilot City*, followed by a recap of the programme's contributions to the city in order to find new areas of work, with the aim of pursuing the commitment of *Agenda 21 for culture*, that is, to make culture one of the pillars of the sustainable development of society, and more specifically of the post-COVID-19 society.

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2 It should be noted that the 2020–2021 health crisis delayed the peer city visit and the self-assessment. Esch's role as a Pilot City has therefore lasted almost four years in total.





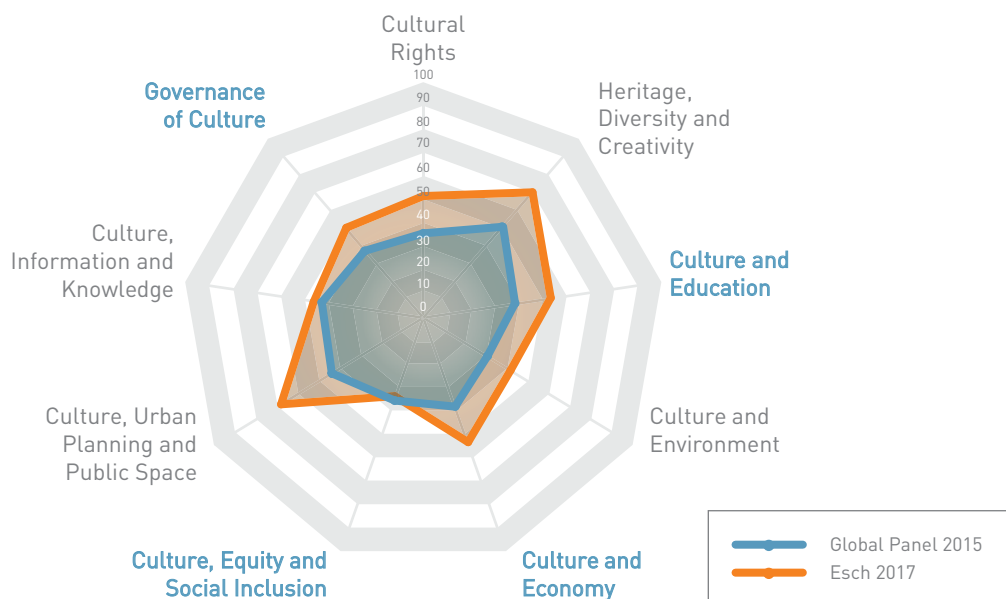
# A RECAP OF ESCH'S INVOLVEMENT AS A PILOT CITY

The city of Esch-sur-Alzette has been a *Pilot City of Agenda 21 for culture* since 2017 and until 2021. This period has marked an important turning point in the city's cultural policy, which corresponds to the beginning of the implementation of the *[Connections]* strategy. Esch has been a *Pilot City* in a particular context, in which it was necessary to involve actors as part of the strategy, train them and test several elements of the cultural policy. In this regard, the *Agenda 21 for culture* programme has proved to be a framework for experimentation. All the activities carried out as a *Pilot City* are summarised here.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. SELF-ASSESSMENT

In February 2017, 66 cultural actors from Luxembourg participated in a self-assessment of the city with regard to the nine Commitments defined by *Agenda 21 for culture*. Partaking as a *Pilot City* allowed for the prioritisation, among the actions included in *[Connections]*, of four areas identified as the 'weaknesses' of Esch's cultural action: culture governance; culture and economy; culture, equity and social inclusion; and culture and education.

**Figure 1: Self-assessment of Esch-sur-Alzette and Global Panel 2015**



<sup>1</sup> This section only reports on the actions defined within the framework of Agenda 21 for culture, which represents part of the actions undertaken by the city in the cultural sphere, defined in the *[Connections]* strategy..



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## 2. FOUR PILOT MEASURES

These four areas of action were addressed by means of four pilot measures.

**Pilot measure 1, 'Establish governance and foster an ecosystem', responds to Commitment 9, 'Culture governance'.** This measure enabled the creation of a Cultural Governance Council, whose role and missions were defined together with Esch's cultural institutions and associations. The Governance Council ensures that the diversity of the city's cultural actors is represented and enables more consensual, 'fairer' decisions to be taken. It has met three times:

- The Governance Council participated in 36 *Culture Breakfasts, Culture Lunches and Culture Days* (see 'Good practices' below) between January 2018 and February 2021. These meetings (from two to eight hours long, depending on the type of meeting) aimed to strengthen cooperation and links between members of the Governance Council, contribute to the continuous training of its members (above all in Culture Days) and decide on the main aspects of the city's cultural policy (above all in Culture Lunches).
- Its members were called to sit on a panel of approximately 60 jurors to decide whether or not to grant funding for cultural projects, including the Esch2022 projects, which received a grant from the city.
- Finally, the Governance Council met in working groups centred on certain city projects, such as reflections on cultural communication, artist residencies, the pathway of artistic and cultural education, the implementation of audience studies, etc.

**Pilot measure 2, 'Supporting economic development through culture by means of specific actions', responds to Commitment 5, 'Culture and economy'.** Through this commitment, the city has developed a tourism and economic strategy based on a joint reflection between different departments. The adopted approach gives priority to the city's inhabitants and to innovative activities centred on the tourist experience. The aim is above all to retain local talent and to become 'the most sustainable and open city in Luxembourg'.

**Pilot Action 3, 'Rethink the cultural event Night of Culture', responds to Commitment 6, 'Culture, equity and social inclusion'.** The Night of Culture is an annual celebratory event organised by cultural institutions since 2010. This measure consisted of rethinking the concept, both in terms of its form and its objectives, which, as of 2018, were reworked



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together with the Governance Council. In 2019, an evaluation was carried out with the organisers (partner institutions, artists, traders and volunteers) at the Department of Culture to highlight possible problematic aspects related to its organisation<sup>2</sup>. In 2020, several new working methods were tested and readapted, and the organising team was significantly expanded. With a view to the *European Capital of Culture* year, a new system has been devised: in 2022, the city will be divided into five sectors with each sector hosting an event, the design of which will be overseen by local collectives (five evenings in total).

**Pilot Action 4, 'Improving coordination between culture and education', responds to Commitment 3, 'Culture and education'**. This pilot measure included a number of ambitious actions. Firstly, a cultural coordinator was appointed to act as a liaison between cultural institutions and schools. Secondly, we analysed the culture available to young people in 2019 by conducting a study on cultural offerings aimed at young people and the cooperation of schools with cultural institutions (through interviews and a statistical analysis of the offerings). This study led to a series of proposals presented to the Cultural Governance Council, including the development of an artistic and cultural education pathway at the local level. In order to address this last proposal, a collective reflection (with cultural institutions and educational actors) was carried out on what an artistic and cultural education pathway could be, resulting in several recommendations. This work was taken on by the Ministry of Education, which showed great interest in implementing it throughout the country.

### 3. TWO VISITS TO PEER CITIES (NAMUR AND LYON)

The city of Esch received an invitation to visit two cities:

- On 16 November, 2018, a delegation participated in a visit to the city of Namur (Belgium) together with other cities. Namur particularly stressed the role of cultural action in social inclusion, urban development and lifelong learning, and we were able to appreciate the impact of integrating cultural clauses into the specifications of all areas of public action.
- On 25, 26 and 27 September, 2019, a delegation participated in a visit to the city of Lyon (France) together with other cities. The exchanges focused mainly on notions of cultural mediation and the participation of inhabitants, in particular their inclusion in juries for funding projects.

<sup>2</sup> An assessment with the participation of the general public had been planned for 2020, but it could not be carried out due to the health situation.



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## 4. GOOD PRACTICES

The city of Esch also had the honour of submitting 'good practices' to Agenda 21 for culture:

- Firstly, *Kufa's Urban Art project* by Kulturfabrik won an International Award UCLG - Mexico City - Culture 21 (November 2017–May 2018) with the collaboration of the Department of Culture.
- Secondly, the *Culture Breakfasts* were recognised as a good practice on the Agenda 21 for culture website.

## 5. A VIRTUAL VISIT TO ESCH FOR PEER CITIES (2020)

At a later date, on 24, 25 and 26 November 2020, a peer city learning visit took place in Esch-sur-Alzette. In view of the constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the visit took the form of a virtual seminar, which was attended by cultural actors from Esch as well as representatives from the cities of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Baie-Mahault, Barcelona, Elefsina, Gabrovo, Galway, Izmir, Leeds, Malmö, Swansea, Terrassa and Vaudreuil-Dorion, in addition to experts from Agenda 21 for culture and representatives from the UCLG Committee on Culture.

Given the impossibility of physically showing Esch to the other cities, we tried to help them get a feel for it through a video presentation, followed by an overview of the actions carried out as a *Pilot City* and, finally, the involvement of those cultural actors from Esch who wished to take part.

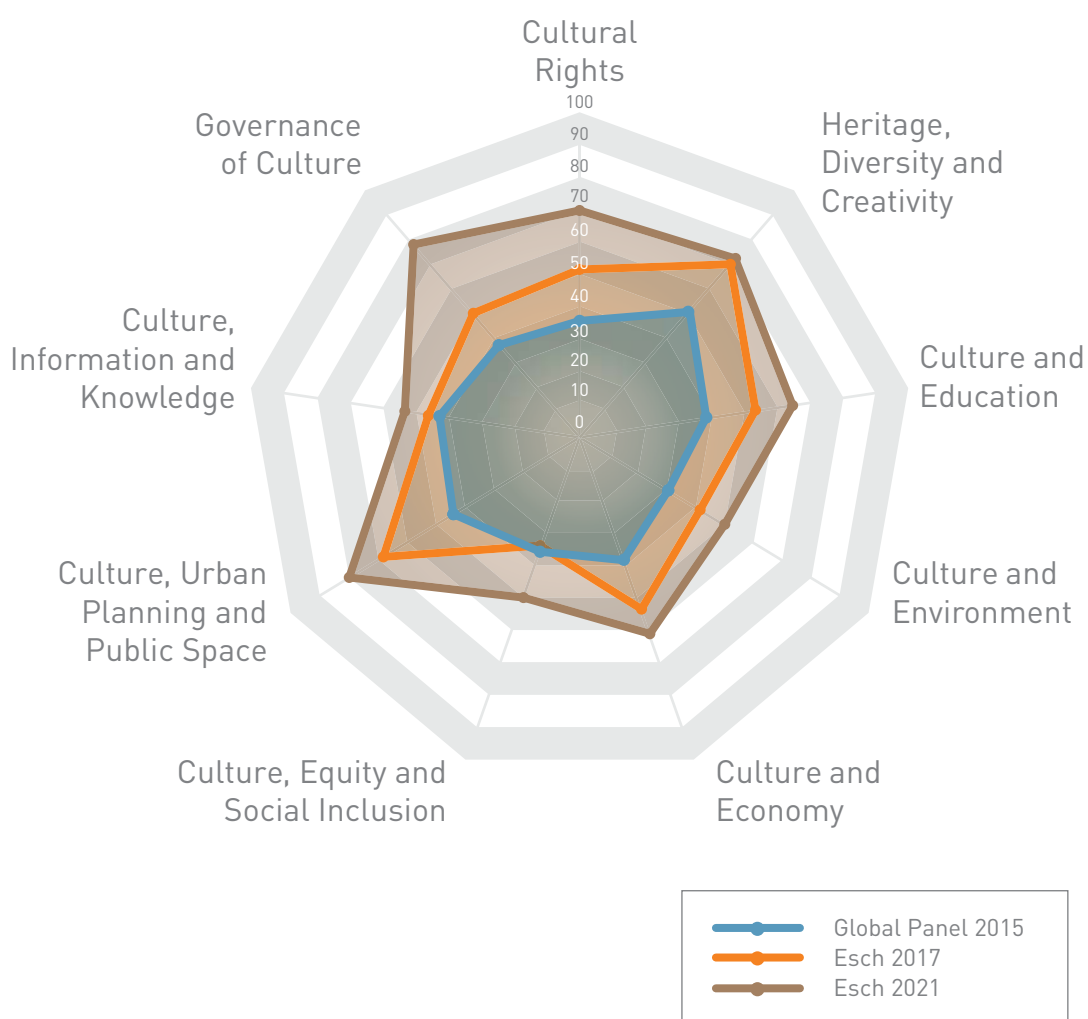
The sessions taking place on the first two days focused on four specific areas, corresponding to the pilot measures of *Agenda 21 for culture* determined by the city. The third day was devoted to a more critical discourse on the application of these measures and, particularly, on the problems encountered in implementing them. Through this workshop, we tried to highlight both the city's successes and limitations. The guest cities were able to bring a new perspective to the issues we face.

## 6. A FINAL SELF-ASSESSMENT (2021)

Finally, a second self-assessment of 'Culture 21: Actions' was carried out virtually on 26 February, 2021, four years after the initial one. The nine Commitments were reviewed by Esch's cultural actors, divided into three groups, which in turn discussed three commitments each, after which a new chart could be drawn up.

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Figure 2: Self-assessment of Esch-sur-Alzette and Global Panel 2015



The results of the 2021 self-assessment show good progress in all areas, but especially in equity and inclusion (+48%), governance (+46%) and cultural rights (+29%).





# THE PROGRAMME'S IMPACT ON THE CITY

In the case of Esch, participation in the *Pilot City* programme has served to guide and reinforce the actions of the Department of Culture from the very beginning of the strategy's implementation. Firstly, it has allowed us to establish priorities: by committing to four pilot measures we have been able to establish the priorities of our cultural strategy, which in turn provides for an overall aim that is broken down into five main areas, 18 goals and over 150 actions.

The *Pilot City* programme has also acted as an accelerator: certain specific actions, with concrete operational objectives, had to be carried out within a limited period of time. The pilot measures have finally made it possible to test several points of the strategy designed with regard to the *European Capital of Culture* and, in particular, cooperation between institutions.

The programme has contributed to creating and fostering synergies between cultural actors and other policy areas at the local and regional level.

Moreover, the programme has allowed us to address the Department of Culture with the opinions of others: first internally (through the two phases of self-evaluation), but also on behalf of the programme's peer cities; the expert who supervised our work, Catherine Cullen; and Jordi Pascual. By listening carefully to internal criticisms, for example, we have realised that we needed to communicate our actions more and change certain ways of doing things. It is also comforting to see that actors in other cities are facing similar issues to ours, sometimes with original ideas for resolving them.

The *Agenda 21 for culture* programme is also an opportunity for continuous training, firstly because the description of the commitments of *Agenda 21 for culture* makes an overall method tangible and comprehensible, raising awareness among actors. Several *Culture Breakfasts* therefore directly addressed the commitments of Agenda 21 in the presence of several municipal departments, thus promoting the cross-cutting nature of actions. The good practices observed in other cities have also been inspiring, and we have been able to establish constructive exchanges with these representatives.

Finally, the inclusion of Esch as a *Pilot City* has been an opportunity to increase its international visibility.



# CONCLUSIONS: WHAT PATH SHOULD THE CITY FOLLOW?

In conclusion, the city of Esch has benefited from a large number of diverse contributions made by the *Pilot City* programme. This support has guided the implementation of the strategy and preparation for the *European Capital of Culture*. Some of the strategy's goals have therefore been achieved, or even surpassed, much faster than expected.

As this commitment draws to a close and as we near *Esch2022 European Capital of Culture*, we believe it is necessary to 1) focus on action, in order to implement *Esch2022*, 2) develop its legacy as well as possible and 3) take time to reflect on the effects of the cultural year (2021–2022). To this end, work carried out in the area of cultural governance must be reinforced, although it is the city's general governance that needs to be put in place as a matter of urgency. In the short term, the city must strengthen cross-cutting cooperation between the different departments and actors.



# CONTACT

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**United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) - Committee on Culture**

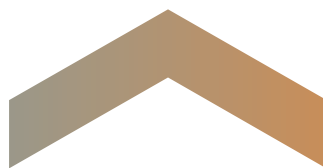
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