



REPORT **CULTURE 21 PLUS WORKSHOP**

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INTRODUCTION

THE UCLG CULTURE COMMITTEE, THE UCLG-MEWA COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND TOURISM, AND CULTURE 21 PLUS

United Cities and Local Governments Middle East and West Asia Section (UCLG-MEWA) held an online workshop on Culture 21 PLUS on 25 February 2025. Designed in collaboration with the UCLG Culture Committee and UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism, the aim of the online workshop was to test the Culture 21 PLUS and to allow for an explanation of the state of local policies in the MEWA Region from the perspective of cultural rights and sustainable development.

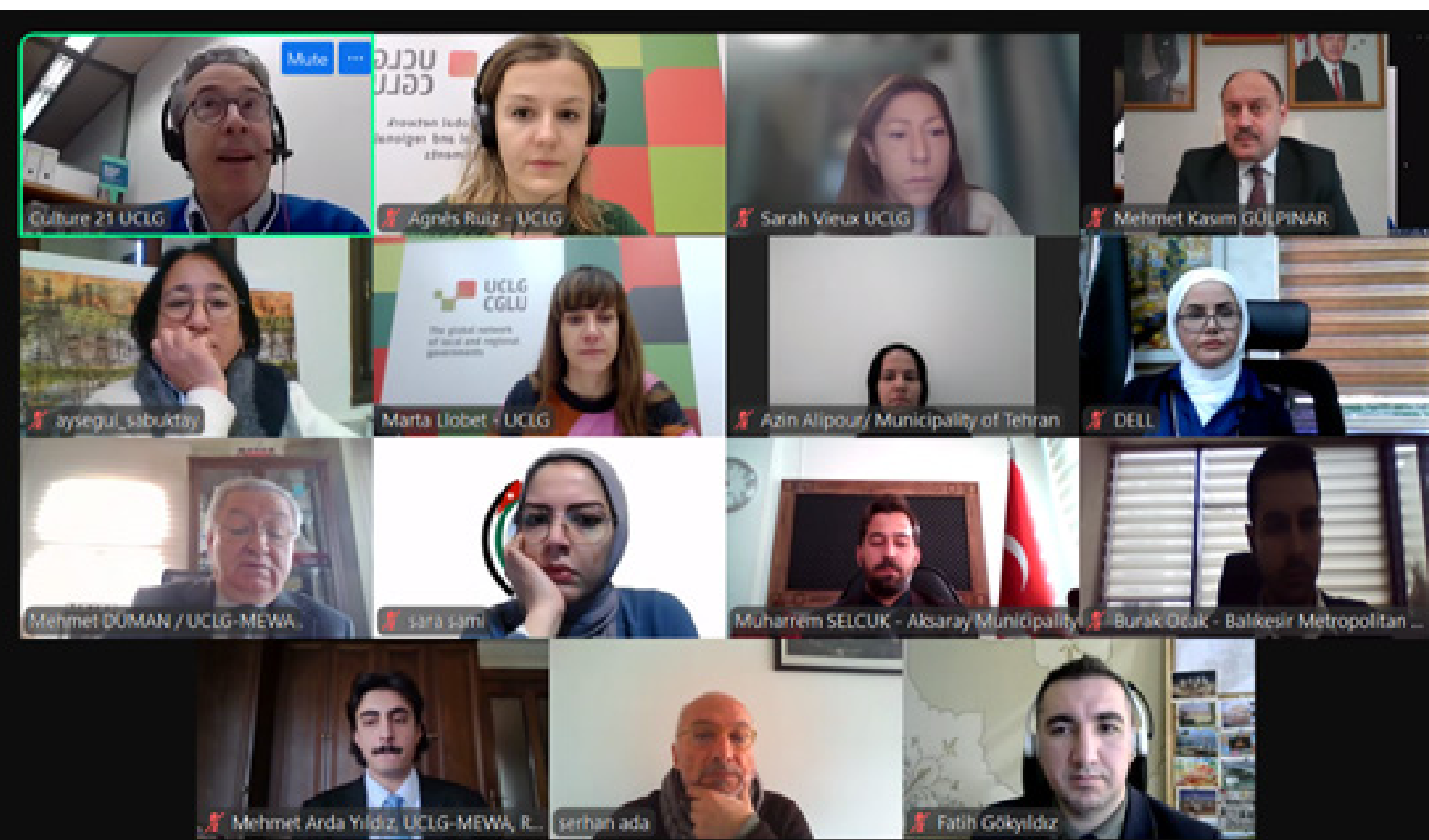
The UCLG Culture Committee is a unique global platform of more than 830 cities, organisations and networks to cooperate and promote the role of culture in sustainable cities. It aims at “promoting culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development through the international dissemination and local implementation of Agenda 21 for culture, as well as fostering and making more explicit the relationship between local cultural policies and sustainable development”.

The UCLG Culture Committee has the following founding documents: Agenda 21 for Culture, adopted in 2004 by cities and local governments from the five continents committed to human rights, cultural diversity, sustainability, participatory democracy and the creation of conditions for peace; the political declaration “Culture: the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development”, adopted in Mexico City in 2010; and the guide Culture 21: Actions, adopted in Bilbao in March 2015 during the first UCLG Culture Summit.

The UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism is one of the six committees of UCLG-MEWA, that aims to offer solutions to local problems in light of the global agendas. The Committee was formed at the UCLG-MEWA Congress held in Amman, Jordan in July 2019 by merging the two separate committees on Culture and Tourism. In doing so, coordination between the two areas, which are often parallel within the MEWA Region and thus in need of coordination, was ensured. The committee operates in line with predefined priorities: advocating for inclusive participation in cultural life, facilitating cultural decentralized cooperation, dissemination of sustainable practices, empowering local governments in the conservation and management of cultural heritages, and strengthening the role of culture in sustainable development.

Culture 21 PLUS Culture 21 Plus enables the UCLG Pact for the Future of Humanity: for the People, for the Planet and for Governments, adopted at the UCLG World Congress in Daejeon in October 2022, to be implemented through concrete actions. Culture 21 Plus is a new toolkit that builds on the latest developments in the field of cultural policies and on the experience developed by the cities of the network that have worked since 2015 with Culture 21: Actions, particularly the cities that take part on the Pilot Cities, Leading Cities and Culture 21 LAB programmes.

The initial draft of Culture 21 Plus, elaborated in 2023, outlines 6 fields and 30 key areas, that try to comprehensively analyse the interlinkages between culture, citizenship and sustainable development. The toolkit allows two possible uses: (1) to carry out a self-assessment of the state of play of the cultural policies of a territory; (2) to design local cultural strategies based on cultural rights and sustainability. The first draft of Culture 21 Plus is an initial proposal that is undergoing a process of experimentation, debate and shared cocreation with the cities of the network; therefore, this draft is evolving and being constantly improved until its adoption in 2025.



CONTEXT

THE MIDDLE EAST AND WEST ASIA REGION

Throughout history, the MEWA Region has witnessed the first human settlements, the emergence and downfall of countless civilizations, and the most influential religious movements. Its prominence regarding the history of humanity itself is yet to be fully understood. As illustrated by the recent discovery of the Göbeklitepe temple in Şanlıurfa, Türkiye, the historical trajectory of humanity has been redefined with the dawn of the oldest human-made monument unbeknownst to us. This prolonged presence of humanity and civilization in the region has unsurprisingly resulted in the blossoming of perhaps the richest and oldest cultural heritage in the world. Inhabiting both tangible and intangible cultural assets in abundance, the MEWA Region is home to more than 100 UNESCO World Heritage Sites and accommodates a uniquely diverse cultural scene, originating from the religious and ethnic pluralism of its inhabitants. Therefore, the region itself is considered a “living heritage” by many.

However, perpetual conflicts and ethnic-religious tensions are threatening the unparalleled richness of the MEWA Region, with inadvertent or systematic devastation of cultures and cultural heritage present at every turn. More recently in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, and in many more locations during the past, the catastrophic impact of armed conflicts and man-made disasters on culture has been laid out for all to see. Moreover, the impact on culture is often overlooked at the national level, especially when compared to the humanitarian and economic repercussions of conflicts. This, in return, assigns local governments in the MEWA Region a much more essential role in sustainably safeguarding and cherishing cultural heritage for future generations.

In line with the previously established context, the invitation to take part in an online workshop on the future of local policies was well-received by many in the region. Participants were eager to share their city’s unique perspective on the current trends and future challenges of local cultural policies. The introduction of the new framework document: Culture 21 PLUS attracted great interest and through the active contribution of city representatives, the MEWA Region’s common outlook on local cultural policies was established.

ONLINE WORKSHOP PREPARATION

The outline and the draft programme of the online workshop were proposed by the UCLG Culture Committee. Through consultations with the team of the UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism, the online workshop took its final form with minimal adjustments.

The online workshop would be a participatory one that required a high level of participation from the attendees. To that end, participants would be asked to connect with their cameras on and microphones unmuted. This would allow exchanges with other representatives and enrich the productivity of the workshop as well. In addition, six city representatives would be asked to offer their focused perspectives on specific blocks of the Culture 21 PLUS framework document through dedicated presentations. The remaining cities would offer their contributions at the end, by explaining the most important block for themselves and presenting further suggestions and feedback accordingly.

Regarding the division of responsibilities, it was agreed that the UCLG Culture Committee would act as a facilitator so that the participants could achieve the expected results, and it would provide the necessary digital platforms for the online meeting and its recording. On the other hand, the UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism would be responsible for providing a list of potential cities, contacting them, and ensuring their participation in the online workshop.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Given the limited resources and the risk of jeopardizing the efficiency of the workshop, it was mutually decided that the number of participants would not exceed 15. Therefore, the selection process was conducted with multiple criteria in mind:

1. REPRESENTATION

The MEWA Region consists of 15 countries, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Thus, ensuring the fair and equal geographical representation of cities throughout the region was essential and equally desired. In addition, the ethnic, religious, and political dynamics of the region and member countries were considered. It was aimed to achieve the most diverse list of participants possible, reflecting that of the MEWA Region.

2. RELEVANCY

As previously established, this online workshop was dedicated to advancing the status of local cultural policies and collecting feedback on the Culture 21 PLUS framework document. Therefore, it was important for the participating cities to have a certain degree of relevant characteristics to the subject. While this criterion applied to every participant, certain cities needed to possess further characteristics vis-a-vis their presentations on the specific blocks of Culture 21 PLUS. Hence, the interplay of several concepts was looked for in their selection e.g. Nature and Culture, Rights and Culture, and Communities and Culture.

3. PRACTICALITY

When the nature of the workshop was considered, certain practical details narrowed down the number of eligible cities. Primarily the lack of English-speaking staff, required experience in local cultural policies, previous contact with UCLG-MEWA nor UCLG, and decentralized local government units created roadblocks that ruled out the possibility of several cities joining the workshop.



THE ONLINE WORKSHOP

The online workshop on Culture 21 PLUS took place on 25 February 2025, at 11:00, Istanbul Time (GMT+3). The welcoming remarks were made by the UCLG-MEWA Secretary General, Dr. Mehmet Duman, UCLG-MEWA Ambassador for Culture and Mayor of Şanlıurfa, Mehmet Kasım Gülpınar, and the UCLG Culture Committee.

1. UCLG-MEWA SECRETARY GENERAL, DR. MEHMET DUMAN:

In his opening remark, the Secretary General emphasized the significance of this workshop. He moved on to underline the region's rich and vibrant cultural heritage while pointing out their **existing systematic devastation**. Reminding the impact of **armed conflicts and man-made disasters on culture** in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other locations, he defined **systematic violence against communities as an act against culture**. Afterwards, he highlighted **local governments' role in safeguarding culture**. To conclude, he shared the activities of the Committee on Culture and Tourism, as well as the plans to extend efforts in the next year.

2. UCLG-MEWA AMBASSADOR FOR CULTURE AND MAYOR OF ŞANLIURFA, MEHMET KASIM GÜLPINAR:

Starting his speech by highlighting the importance of Culture 21 PLUS and this workshop, the mayor emphasized the rich cultural heritage of Şanlıurfa, including the diverse disposition and achievements of the MEWA region. He referenced the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the region like: Göbeklitepe in Şanlıurfa, Petra in Jordan, Babylon in Iraq, and Persepolis in Iran, while mentioning important intangible heritages as well. He went on by underlining the importance of culture not only as our heritage but **as a tool for sustainable development**. Defining culture as **indispensable for designing the cities of the future**, the mayor concluded his remarks by reaffirming Şanlıurfa's dedication to **international collaboration** and dedicated projects.



Afterwards, Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the UCLG Culture Committee, introduced the Culture 21 PLUS framework document to the participants and initiated the discussion.

The thematic presentations of six different cities conveyed their perspectives on all of the six blocks of Culture 21 PLUS. More specifically, the representatives from Baghdad Municipality and Balıkesir Metropolitan Municipality on Block 2: “**Communities**” and Block 3: “**Prosperity**”; the representatives from İzmir Metropolitan Municipality and Greater Karak Municipality on Block 4: “**Territories**” and Block 5: “**Nature**”; the representatives from İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality and Ramallah Municipality on Block 1: “**Rights**” and Block 6: “**Governance**”:

1. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM BAGHDAD MUNICIPALITY (IRAQ), **KHAWLAH KHAZRAJI:**

She first mentioned the plans to **safeguard** tangible and intangible heritages, that envision the **restoration** of historical sites, **revitalization** of cultural life, and promotion of heritage **awareness**. She then referred to the transformation of heritage houses into hubs for creativity. Defining culture as the **soul of communities**, she compared cultural heritage sites to bridges that **connect generations**. With the restoration projects of two important landmarks, she highlighted the role of preserving and displaying cultural heritage in **inspiring future generations** and rendering the legacies and contributions of important historical figures of Baghdad **accessible to everyone**. She concluded by stating their interest in achieving an intersection of **culture, education, and community**.

2. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM BALIKESIR METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY (TÜRKİYE), **BURAK OCAK:**

He defined their approach to developing **human-centered** urban policies and services that align with the **SDGs**; and their cultural vision that aims to **preserve** cultural heritage while increasing the amount and quality of **accessible activities**. He summarized current trends including the enhancement of **cultural participation**; inclusively **empowering culture** and arts through festivals; and preserving cultural heritage and **local production** through women and youth **participation in the local economy**. He then listed challenges as: the distance between districts that limits cultural interactions and results in **uneven coverage**, the elderly population that requires **further accessibility**, the concentration of cultural and touristic activities to a **specific time and region**, and the decline of **local producers and traditional cultural products**.

3. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM İZMİR METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY (TÜRKİYE), AYSEGUL SABUKTAY:

She identified the **lack of integrated cultural policy** as a challenge and referred to their focus group workshops with the districts. She then exemplified **public cultural spaces** and their environmental threats like **flooding and heat waves**. Addressing the **financial difficulties**, she pointed out the limits on research and data collection projects, archeological excavations, promotion and upkeep of heritage sites, fairs, and festivals to support agricultural culture. She named **urbanization** as a challenge for archeology and landscape planning. Displaying their dedicated promotion projects, she touched upon roadblocks concerning **social transition and coexistence**. She wrapped up her speech by mentioning their international collaborations on reducing carbon emissions of cultural buildings and **sustainable territorial development** in the Mediterranean.

4. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM GREATER KARAK MUNICIPALITY (JORDAN), ARCH. SARA EL-SHQEIRAT:

Listing urban heritage **conservation**, the role of **public space** in cultural identity, the intersection of **tradition and modernity**, the need for **new approaches** in urban planning, and **outmigration** as challenges, she introduced causal links between the decline of **economic vibrancy** and loss of culture, and between **depopulation** and weakening of heritage conservation. She underlined the current trends, arguing that depopulation provokes neglect of cultural heritage, hence the loss of **architectural and cultural identity**, and the decline of the **tourism industry**. Naming **climate change, waste management, financial deficit**, and **water scarcity** as environmental challenges limiting their cultural policies, she concluded by mentioning the **revitalization efforts** of the old city as per the instructions of King Abdullah II of Jordan.

5. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM İSTANBUL METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY (TÜRKİYE), HÜSEYİN SERT:

He introduced the concept of “**right to culture, right to the city**”, defining culture as a fundamental right for everyone and explaining their **participatory, inclusive, and innovative** approach to decision-making, event planning, and capacity building. Reflecting on the last 5 years, he explained how cultural events have increased in number and diversity, and their focus was on policy and **data-based** culture management, **inclusive** events, renovations of heritage areas, **funding** for cultural sectors, and public engagement. Lastly, he detailed their future vision of **multidimensional culture management** that implements **institutionalized** policy management, **equal** dissemination throughout the city, and **cooperation** with the civil and independent cultural sectors.

6. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM RAMALLAH MUNICIPALITY (PALESTINE), IRENE SAADEH:

She introduced Ramallah as a city that **embraces everyone** and acknowledges peoples' **rights to the city, local economy, and culture**. Referring to a **participatory** cultural policy in 2021, that included the feedback of over 100 stakeholders, she explained Ramallah's focus on **human rights and cultural development** while considering the local demands and the Palestinian heritage. Considering the volatile local dynamics, she explained how they were forced to adopt a **flexible cultural strategy** that prioritized data collection, restoration, and digitalization to **preserve and record** cultural heritage. Mentioning the dedicated budget and department for culture, she informed participants on how festivals and celebrations are halted out of respect for the current situation. Lastly, she identified their main challenges as **international developments and double standards, outdated national laws, limited funds, the genocide in Gaza, settler violence and forced displacement in the West Bank, and overall occupation of land and resources by the Israeli authorities**.

Later on, the meeting included the active participation of the remaining representatives, with each defining the most prominent block according to their city, offering their comments and/or suggestions.

1. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM MERSIN METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY (TÜRKIYE), İBRAHİM EVRİM:

Expressing his **approval** of the workshop and the framework document, he introduced Mersin as a **vibrant** Mediterranean city, with significant **historical and cultural** qualities. He elaborated on the cultural initiatives of Mersin Metropolitan Municipality that support **sportive activities and festivals**. He concluded his remarks by inviting participants of the workshop to visit Mersin in person.

2. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM GREATER AMMAN MUNICIPALITY (JORDAN), ENG. GULENAR ALHAWARI:

Emphasizing the **Block 1: "Rights"**, she mentioned the efforts to identify the needs of inhabitants through various cultural events. She expressed their focus on **sustainable development and cultural engagement** initiatives to promote culture and stated their aim to make sure citizens engage positively with the city. She defined their main challenge as the **overcrowded and mixed population** of Amman. Lastly, she shared their agenda to enhance cultural development while preserving the **heritage and authenticity** of the city.

3. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM HEBRON MUNICIPALITY (PALESTINE), SAID ALKHATIB ALTAMIMI:

He took the floor by informing the participants that Hebron was designated as the **capital of Islamic culture for 2026** by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) and that it was included in the **UNESCO World Heritage list** in 2017. Mentioning the 14 centers of culture, heritage, and sport in Hebron, he pointed out its **6000 years** of history. As part of their activities, he explained that they pay special attention to the **local tourism industry**. He concluded his remarks by calling for **solidarity** with Palestine and its cultural heritage.

4. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM NABLUS MUNICIPALITY (PALESTINE), AYMAN SHAKAA:

Defining Nablus as a prominent historic center in Palestine and a millennial city, he addressed their challenges in relation to the **Israeli occupation**. He expressed that despite the difficulties, they maintain their services and continue to take care of their cultural heritage. Citing their restoration and transformation projects of old industrial facilities, he highlighted the special consideration of **industrial heritage and cultural public spaces**. He also explained their focus on **innovation and new technologies** in relation to culture before ending his remarks.

5. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM TEHRAN MUNICIPALITY (IRAN), AZIN ALIPOUR:

She first underlined the need to incorporate all six blocks of Culture 21 PLUS to strengthen the role of culture in sustainable development, then putting special emphasis on the critical role of planning at the urban and territorial levels in regard to the **Block 4: "Territories"**. Believing that this integration can be effectively addressed through **urban cultural planning**, she justified her perspective by explaining how culture shapes the values and interactions of habitants in relation to their cities. Reaffirming the necessity of **effective territorial cultural planning** for unlocking the full potential of sustainable development, she pointed out the requirement for a **deep understanding** of the diverse cultural assets and narratives within a particular geographic area.

6. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM JOUNIEH MUNICIPALITY (LEBANON), ROMY LOUIS:

She defined **cultural sustainability, youth engagement, and sports development** as their primary focus areas. Emphasizing the importance of **cultural territorial planning**, she detailed their policies to preserve cultural spaces and green areas while balancing tourism and local needs. She highlighted Jounieh's attention to **urban cultural expressions** through examples of events that showcase Lebanese and francophone heritage, contemporary creativity, and urban installations. Mentioning their efforts to preserve churches, souks,

and traditional architecture, she referred to their urban design that **blends modernity with tradition**, incorporating public spaces that encourage social interaction and cultural expression. She introduced the unique **interplay of culture and sports** in Jounieh, which benefits **youth engagement** as well.

7. THE REPRESENTATIVE FROM ŞANLIURFA METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY (TÜRKİYE), **ELIF ESRA ÖNAL:**

She suggested the participation of the Mayor of Şanlıurfa and the UCLG MEWA Culture Ambassador, Mehmet Kasım Gülpınar, in the **MONDIACULT 2025** meeting, delivering a speech on behalf of the MEWA region. Emphasizing the potential of this engagement in highlighting the **role of local governments in global culture policies**, she argued that it would be an important step in supporting the **cultural development** of the region. Moreover, underlining the expectation from events like MONDIACULT to **strengthen** the contribution of local governments to global cultural policies, she reaffirmed their belief that this proposal would demonstrate the regional contributions and their **positive impact** on cultural development from a broader perspective.

After a productive session, the meeting concluded with the closing remarks of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Serhan Ada and UCLG-MEWA Secretary General Dr. Mehmet Duman:

1. ASSOC. PROF. **DR. SERHAN ADA:**

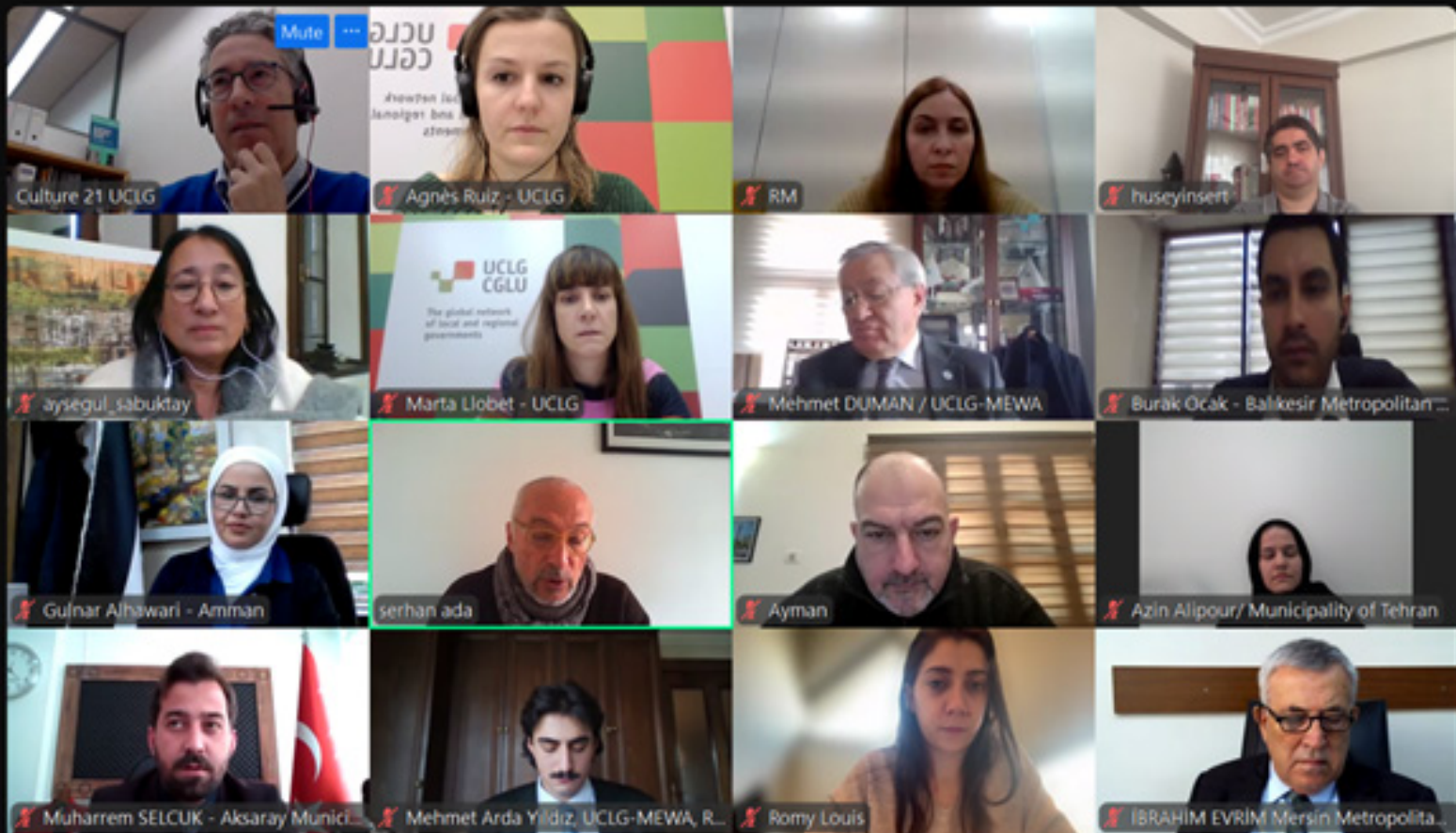
He first acknowledged the **resilience** displayed in the region despite ongoing conflicts and occupation, congratulating the Palestinian representatives for their commitment to culture. He then remarked on the potential for a **new voice on culture** from this region through examples of Jericho and Çatalhöyük, the earliest urban settlements known. Identifying Culture 21 PLUS as a **flexible tool, adaptable, and embracing of diversity**, he chose **Block 2: “Communities”** as the most important one, mentioning it as the ultimate aim of culture itself. He called for culture to be mainstreamed in **all aspects of life**, like the six blocks. He concluded by emphasizing the need for **contemporary expressions of culture**.

2. UCLG-MEWA SECRETARY GENERAL **DR. MEHMET DUMAN:**

He took the floor by congratulating UCLG on this initiative and thanking the participants. He also extended his gratitude to the Ambassador for Culture for his contributions. Joining him on his call for the **inclusion of local governments in the MONDIACULT 2025** meeting, he reaffirmed his belief in local perspectives to positively contribute to global cultural policies. Expressing his **hope** for this workshop to advance Culture 21 PLUS, he wished to **strengthen collective efforts** in placing culture at the **heart of sustainable development**. After thanking everyone again, he concluded the meeting by making explicit his enthusiasm for the **continuation of this collaboration**.

RESULTS OF THE ONLINE WORKSHOP

The webinar was a meaningful presentation on UCLG's new Culture 21 Plus framework and its relevance to the Middle East and West Asia region, with representatives from various cities showcasing and discussing their local cultural policies and challenges. The meeting highlighted the significant activities of the Culture Committee, the importance of preserving and sharing cultural values, and the potential of cultural policies to contribute to sustainable development and improve the quality of life. The discussion also served as an invitation to MEWA cities to propose specific modules for the Culture 21 Plus programme, tailored to their needs and interests, and allowed for them to strengthen their involvement in the programmes and activities of the UCLG Culture Committee.



NEXT STEPS

After the workshop, next steps in the framework of the involvement of the UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism in the Culture 21 Plus process and further activities of the UCLG Culture Committee include the following:

- UCLG Culture Committee will present summaries of the webinars and seminars held on Culture 21 Plus at the upcoming UCLG Culture Committee meeting, on 27 February 2025.
- UCLG will present a final draft of Culture 21 Plus framework document at the Executive Bureau meeting in Sevilla in April 2025.
- All participating cities to the webinar will continue devoting efforts in preserving cultural heritage and implementing cultural policies aligned with sustainable development goals.
- UCLG Culture Committee will begin to release technical modules for Culture 21 Plus in May or June 2025.
- UCLG will keep participants informed about the upcoming UCLG Culture Summit, to be held in September 2025.
- UCLG MEWA to consider developing specific modules for Culture 21 Plus tailored to Middle East and West Asian municipalities.

ANNEX 1

PARTICIPANTS IN THE WEBINAR

SURNAME	NAME	POSITION	INSTITUTION
Duman	Dr. Mehmet	Secretary General	UCLG-MEWA
Duman	Dr. Ali Murat	General Coordinator	UCLG-MEWA
Gökyıldız	Fatih	Coordinator for Research, Development and Projects Department, Focal Point for the UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism	UCLG-MEWA
Rafiq	Junaïd	Coordinator for Communications Department	UCLG-MEWA
Yıldız	Mehmet Arda	Research Assistant	UCLG-MEWA
Kaplan	Emine	Administrative and Financial Affairs Personnel	UCLG-MEWA
Selçuk	Muharrem	Culture and Tourism Specialist	Aksaray
Alhawari	Eng. Gulenar	Manager of Public Libraries/ Cultural Sector	Amman
Khazraji	Khawlah	Head of Culture	Baghdad
Ocak	Burak	Foreign Relations Personnel	Balıkesir
Alkhatib Altamimi	Said	Head Of International Relations	Hebron
Sert	Hüseyin	Deputy Director of Culture	İstanbul
Sabuktay	Aysegul	Izmir Mediterranean Academy Branch of Izmir Metropolitan Municipality	İzmir
Türkben	Mert	Foreign Relations Department	İzmir
Louis	Romy	Focal Point for the Children Municipal Council	Jounieh
El-Shqeirat	Arch. Sara	International Exchange Coordinator, Director of The Sustainable Development Unit	Karak
Evrin	İbrahim	Advisor to the Mayor	Mersin
Shakaa	Ayman	Director of Multi-Purpose Community Resources Centre of Nablus Municipality	Nablus
Saadeh	Irene	Head of Sustainable Development Unit	Ramallah

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SURNAME	NAME	POSITION	INSTITUTION
Gülpınar	Mehmet Kasım	Mayor of Şanlıurfa and UCLG-MEWA Ambassador for Culture	Şanlıurfa
Önal	Elif Esra	Head of Foreign Relations Department	Şanlıurfa
Kahyaoğlu	Abdurrahman	Foreign Relations Specialist	Şanlıurfa
Alipour	Azin	Assistant to the Deputy of International Affairs	Tehran
Ada	Assoc. Prof. Dr. Serhan	Associate Professor	Istanbul Bilgi University
Pascual	Jordi	Coordinator of the UCLG Culture Committee	UCLG
Vieux	Sarah	UCLG Manager, Communication at the Culture Committee	UCLG
Llobet	Marta	UCLG, Programme Manager. Focal Point for Culture	UCLG
Ruiz	Agnès	UCLG Policy Officer. Focal Point for Culture	UCLG



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