

Report on the Virtual Forum of African Culture Ministers on the impact of COVID—19 Pandemic on the Arts, Culture and Heritage

The virtual forum of the African Union Ministers responsible of Arts, Culture and Heritage in Africa was held on Wednesday the 27th May 2020 from 15:00 to 18:00 East African Time. The ministerial forum aims at discussing the repercussions of the pandemic Covid-19 on the cultural sector in line with the AU continental strategy and coming up with urgent actions and recommendations to alleviate its impact.

Chaired by his Excellency Lai Mohamed, the minister of Culture and Information of Nigeria, this meeting recorded the participation of the majority of AU member states, regional economic communities, as well as partner organizations, and officials from the AU respective departments, namely AFREXIM BANK, OCPA, CELHTO, AFRICA CDC.

The forum had on its agenda the following points:

- Discuss the current challenges brought upon the cultural and creative industries sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Reflect on the responses being initiated within the respective policies frameworks across the AU Member States;
- Share best practices from Member States to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic, particularly in the field of arts, culture and heritage;
- Recommendations and subsequent action plan to support arts, culture and heritage sector in Africa;
- Social security schemes to curb the impact of COVID-19 for cultural workers;
- Documentation and sharing of the best practices replicated by Member States.

The Virtual Forum on the impact of COVID—19 Pandemic on the arts, culture and heritage sector was initiated by a speech delivered by Her Excellency the commissioner of the social affairs at the AU headquarters, Amina El Fadil who first congratulated AU member states of the Africa day, celebrated through a virtual concert in support of the AU on the 25th May, also she expressed her appreciation of the commitment of the participants including ministers and partner organs. Her Excellency emphasized the acuteness of the global health crisis and its manifold repercussions on various fields including the cultural sector, considering its

meticulousness, at the regional, national and the local levels and over the long term. Mrs. El Fadil encouraged cooperation among AU member states following the continental strategy in response to the covid19 that was initiated by the meeting of health ministers on the 22nd of February, specifying that the impacts are not limited to the health sector but extend to the socioeconomic level as whole.

Taking the floor after the word of welcome, his Excellency Mr. Lai Mohamed the minister of information and culture of Nigeria presented briefly, as the chairman and the second vice chairperson of the Third Specialized Technical Committee of Youth Culture and Sports- the draft programme of the meeting followed by a statement of the situation of the cultural scene in Nigeria during the global health crisis. The cancellation of taxation and the granting of financial help to small cultural industry businesses are remarkable decisions taken by the state to mitigate the impact of social distancing on the national industry and business. Mr. Lai Mohamed, insisted on the cooperation among AU member states to share expertise and overcome challenges together during this pandemic.

Mr Lai Mohamed yielded the floor to the first speaker of the working session Dr. John Nkengasong – Director of Africa CDC on the AU Continental Strategy as a Response to COVID -19 – By Africa CDC who presented statistics of the pandemic spread over the different African regions, he then put forward the operations of the covid19 task force to prevent transmission, deaths and social harm in Africa working with a total budget of 600\$ million. Some of the mentioned action was the airlifting of DRC responders by Cameroon military to support Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

To close the series of the working session, Prof. Benedict O. Oramah, President AFREXIM Bank, speech followed. He emphasized the need to mobilize all the resources at disposal to limit the impact of the health crisis on the economy and the prominence of financial assistance to the cultural and creative industries as a major revenue generating business that provides living to large categories around Africa. The president of AFREXIM Bank recognized that digitality provides space to the growth of creative content economy during the pandemic such as the high demand on visual/ audio content virtually. Mr. Benedict O. Oramah concluded by stating that it is high time for the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA).

The session of the ministers' interventions to share best practices in the cultural sector to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of covid 19 pandemic was initiated by Gambia minister of Tourism and Culture. Mr. Hamat Ngai Kumba Bah asserted the risk facing the cultural sector since it grants job opportunities for self-employed youth that now lost their professions temporarily because of the measures to call off performances, cancel festivals, and freeze artistic mobility programs. For this, Gambian state favored dialogue with art and culture professionals to come up with project proposal for arts and culture and the setting of a rescue plan for small businesses in the form of loans and grants. Similarly to Gambia's policy, Mozambican Minister of Culture and Tourism Mrs. Eldevina Materula stressed the importance of meeting with the artists and professionals for an inclusive dimension of their needs and current situation, while drawing attention to the constant and interminable role of culture, arts and creativity that thrive even in crisis time.

The economic financial downfall of the global health crisis is indeed very decisive consequently it was predominant all over the intervention session. It typifies a huge concern to AU member states as culture, arts and heritage being at the heart of sustainable development agenda of the African Union as a form of creative industry and an aspect embedded in the fabric of every African. Financial help strategy and actions are pervasive among the agendas of all ministers of Culture; exemption of tax fees, release of disaster funds and access to bank loans are measures adopted by Guinea, Egypt, South Africa, Chad and Uganda. While Tunisia and Algeria resolved to welfare system and social security development for arts sector workers. In the same line, Kenya adopted a stimulus plan of one million dollars to support creative industry. Mali allocated a fund to support the cultural creative sector while Zimbabwe set up funds for athletes and artists, a relief fund for youth businesses and another fund for small and medium enterprises.

An alternative plan to maintain activity in the cultural sector is the art digitalization and e-branding of cultural products that many member states embraced. By way of illustration, advisor to the minister of culture and antiquities of Egypt Mrs. Eman Zidan indicated the reliance on virtual visits to historical monuments and online ticketing. Rwanda, Tunisia Zimbabwe, and Kenya proposed the digitalization of commercialization, content creation, and artistic platforms to sustain cultural production.

Mr. Pierre Ismael Bidoung Mkpatt, the Cameroon minister of Arts and Culture shared equal concerns and proactive decisions to raise awareness of the pandemic by involving the cultural and artistic centers and favoring local therapeutic knowledge, fashion and design in the local manufacturing of masks as well as intensive awareness actions carried out in local languages.

Advisor of the Tunisian minister of Culture Mrs. Sanaa Laabidi expressed the willingness to join forces with other member states in the continent in order to be proactive in the advocacy for arts and culture, and to give the creative sector and art professionals the needed tools, notably through the development of strong cultural policies. Congo Republic and Mali appealed for more exchange of expertise, regular evaluation and partnerships among African states to emerge thanks to the virtual forum in line with the continental AU strategy in response to Covid 19 pandemic. In the same spirit, South African minister of Sports, Arts, and Culture Mr. Mthethwa made a call for collaboration among African states which was reaffirmed and welcomed by AU member states present in the forum.

The closing of the virtual forum of African ministers of Culture on the impact of covid 19 pandemic on Culture, Arts and Heritage sector was marked by a commitment to further collaboration and partnership during the health crisis. Her Excellency Amira El. Fadil commissioner of the social affairs at the African Union assigned Mrs. Angela Martins to present the summary of recommendations. In line with the charter of African Cultural Renaissance, the AU modern law on the Protection of Cultural Property and Heritage, the AU 2063 agenda and the UN Agenda, the AU member states are committed to advocate for sensitizing artists, actors and musicians to use creative ways and means to continue producing culture on different virtual platforms, to endorse heritage experts to continue dissemination and promotion of information on African heritage through digital means and to maintain the sharing of the best practices to sustain culture during crisis.

Final notes were delivered by his Excellency the chairperson of the virtual forum Mr. Lai Mohamed Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture and the second vice chairperson of the Third Specialized Technical Committee of Youth Culture and Sports.