



## Dragan's Point: Sustainability of Cultural NGO's in the Current Economic Crisis

Report of the Learning Session at IETM Meeting in Vilnius, October 9<sup>th</sup>

This Learning Session focused on particular risks and difficulties thrust upon cultural NGO's as a result of the current economic recession. "I did not study economy", opened Dragan Klaic, the very active Amsterdam based theater scholar and cultural analyst, and the leader of our session. "I studied theater. But who here did study economy?" The rhetorical question was left, of course, unanswered. Yet the point is, it is now in our hands, as leaders of the cultural sector, to learn to think in new ways, and find solutions for the difficult situation we are in, using our pulled resources of experience. Klaic insisted that this was no seminar, but rather a workshop, for the participants to learn from each other, and use shared knowledge of hardships or successful triumphs as weapons in the fight for survival within the current crisis.

Klaic presented his analysis with an 11 point discussion, which led from diagnosing and understanding the problem towards possible strategic interventions and feasible plans of action. But the discussion was never a lecture, merely steered and spurred by Klaic, who asked intriguing and specific questions, and regularly pointed on colleagues who would have something relevant to say about the topic at hand. The conversation was entirely engaging, as there were many participants from an impressive range of organizations of all kinds, who had different histories and tips to share. I will attempt to summarize the most important points of the captivating and varied conversation.

### Dragan's point 1: Diagnosis

A recession means negative growth in two subsequent quarters. Are the analysts and politicians who shout "it's all over" only engaging in wishful thinking? Are they just trying

to convince us, so that in ignorance of the problem, people will behave normally, that is start to consume, and the wound will heal itself? Are they just trying to wish it away? We must have an honest look at the current state of things, within our own location and cultural sector.

#### Dragan's point 2: The Big Burp

As the economy deteriorates, sponsors disappear, there are radical budgetary cuts for public salaries and arts funding, and the box office income dries up - or perhaps not? In some places there is a surprising increase in box office because of lower prices. Some smaller theaters are feeling the effects of public subsidy and sponsorship cuts less than larger ones who depend on such means of funding- those that have existed for a long time almost without government funding and have found means of survival in catering to the artist community continue to do so. Many places aren't feeling the effects of budget cuts yet, but will within the next fiscal year. Some places are surviving the crisis through networking with wealthier regions and bank conglomerates.

#### Dragan's point 3: How is the cultural scene responding?

The cultural scene is protesting the losses and cuts just like many other affected areas- however the suffering of culture is viewed in many places as a luxury problem. Some professionals in the culture choose to take a temporary pause during this tough time- to continue owb education or begin parenting. Those in places where culture is badly funded are not feeling the effects as heavily, merely giving up the dream that one day they will receive the same financial support as their foreign counterparts.

#### Dragan's point 4: Possible interventions

Many NGO's are being forced to cut staff, salaries, or resources, some are creating mergers and networks to help each other survive. Many are turning towards education as a source of income. Even creative industry is a source of hope, as ways are being sought to commercialize or popularize work. Some are taking unusual and drastic measures, such as leasing paintings to private firms, or creating performances as promotion for corporations. And some are just giving up.

#### Dragan's point 5: More options

There is a need for reconsideration in the way debates are being phrased, how, and to whom. The most important thing is- know who you're talking to and what language they speak. "I realized I was talking to dancers about money, and bankers about art" This is unfortunately an all too common shortcoming of cultural leaders who are forced in difficult times to wear the suit jackets of finance managers and politicians. Leadership,

public relations, and board management are becoming more important in the crisis - you must have a strong and healthy governing body in order to survive.

#### Dragan's point 6: Strategic orientations

Can we expand our audience through digital means? Can we tune into the interests of target groups? Which ones? Can alliances with other government programs (such as education, social work) be made? How can we prove that cultural programs are just as important? "We should always contemplate our own demise." But the desire to prove to the public that culture is needed is a tricky and dangerous argument? In such times, would actions such as a cultural strike yield disturbingly little results?

#### Dragan's point 7: International cooperation

Can those who are suffering benefit from alliances with financially stronger communities? Or is the only option to tour- follow where the money (still) is? How is mobility in general affected? There is less funding overall for travel to international conferences and festivals - how can we assure that our international connections remain strong? Is there a way to cater to both global and local concerns simultaneously, to squeeze out as much income as possible?

#### Dragan's point 8: Forms of cooperation

To help each other survive, we can focus on strengthening the following: export and exchange (not only cooperation, but also trade, where both parties can benefit); festivals and residencies to draw local and international attention and attract funds from places which still sit financially secure in the cultural sector; professional debate, training and research to strengthen tactics and strategies; co-productions which pool wealth from numerous organizations. Many international networks for the arts (such as IETM) are focusing on bringing people together in ways that help us all stay afloat.

#### Dragan's point 9: Advocacy, voicing

We all know the importance of proper representation and publicity in achieving the goals of our organization. But in what way can/should our tactics and approaches change in light of the current economic climate? How can we overcome tensions and frictions to build up trust, with those we are advocating to, and those who are also in contention, so that we can all become allies? In times of crisis, it is always best to unite rather than divide.

#### Dragan's point 10: What is feasible?

Establish or reinforce a platform of cultural NGO's that is beyond an emergency coalition- an association with a steady public profile, that will monitor, inform, analyze,

and when necessary, intervene on behalf of its members. Try to push forward a positive message, rather than catastrophic outcries or “poor me” and attempts at provoking pity. Provide a platform, a face, that the public, and our own associates can believe in.

#### Dragan’s point 11: Action Plan

Advocate a reform of the public funding of culture. Engage in the mutual promotion of other cultural NGO’s and NGO associations. Become an interlocutor to the public authorities and especially to the ministry of culture. We must find a way to ensure the frequency of meetings of associates, in order to undertake concrete tasks and appear continuously as an advocate in the media, as an agent of change among the cultural organizations and as a reformist voice.

As you can clearly see, it was a very informative meeting, full of many more ideas and discussion points than I have the space to write about. Indeed, 3 pages are not enough space, and two hours was not enough time to fully analyze and resolve the current struggles we are all facing in light of current worldwide economic concerns. However, I left the meeting with a much clearer awareness of how the struggle is comparable, and yet different for us all, some clear ideas of tactics to help combat it, and indeed- a bit of hope. For more information and consideration on these important points, and many other social/cultural concerns, which compose the impressive body of work of Dragan Klaic, visit <http://www.draganklaic.eu/>.

*“The recession is biting heavily but it seems not so severely as to force our colleagues to consider some radical options that would in a significant way alter their NGOs and their position. The recession might be over statistically but high unemployment and the reduction of public and private money for culture will be felt throughout 2010 and probably 2011. The essential struggle is not for more money but for the appreciation and affirmation of culture as a public good rather than just commercial commodity.”*

Dr Dragan Klaic

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