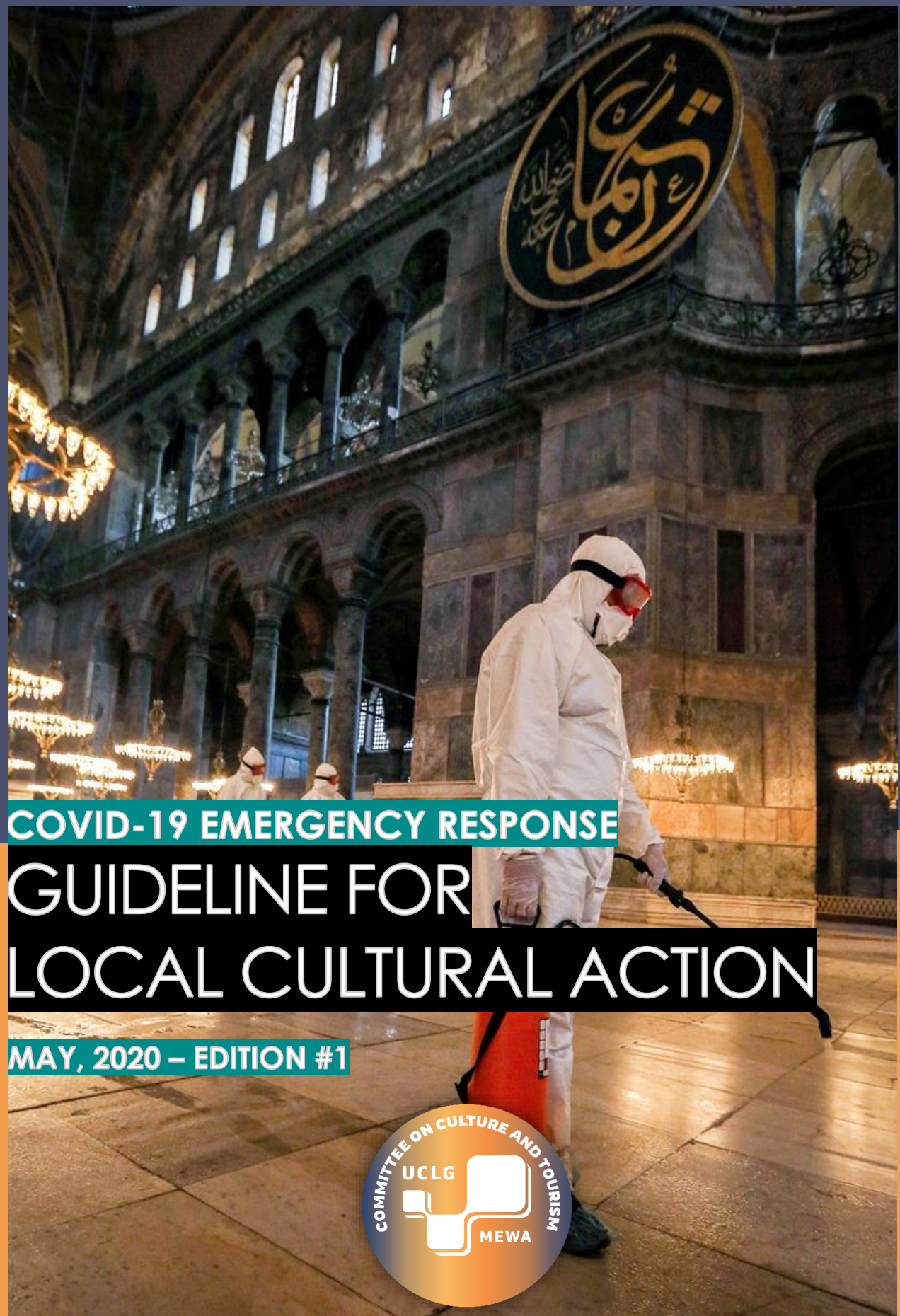
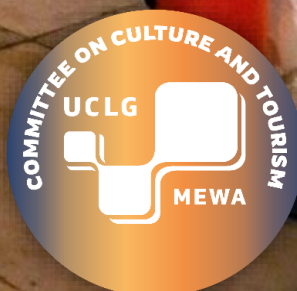




COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE GUIDELINE FOR LOCAL CULTURAL ACTION

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*This guideline is prepared as a recommendation by **UCLG-MEWA Committee on Culture and Tourism** for contributing to local governments' short or middle-term response plans. Any feedback and/or experience-sharing are welcomed by our team: Osman Çorumlu (o.corumlu@uclg-mewa.org) and Jülide Çetin Akkuş (j.cetin@uclg-mewa.org)*

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INTRODUCTION

Culture and cultural sector have been affected enormously by recent pandemic like every segment of our societies. Heritage sites and cultural venues are mostly closed and related events are mostly cancelled by the public and private sector as it must be. Yet, culture, to some extent, has managed to survive under these circumstances by the dint of people's appreciation and ongoing provision of cultural services through online platforms. Culture has emerged as an antidote and integral part of the time people spend at home during the voluntary/compulsory home quarantines all around the world.

Beyond protecting themselves from the virus and surviving with shelter and food, human beings have sophisticated intellectual needs, and culture stands in the middle of an individual's search for meaning, while local governments stand in the middle of provision of cultural services. During the crisis of COVID-19, two challenges have emerged for local governments: bringing culture to people staying at home and protecting cultural sector by all means.

Even though local governments have made a serious effort in this regard, there are still steps they need to take to protect employees/freelancers and enhance the online cultural content. Notably in the MEWA Region, the field of culture has been neglected by local governments amid the pandemic. To reverse it and to achieve what we call **#CulturalResilience**, we present this guideline as a short or middle-run roadmap to the local governments in the MEWA region and all others.



ROAD TO CULTURAL RESILIENCE

AT THE LOCAL LEVEL



ADOPT A RESPONSE PLAN

Systematic and culture-oriented approach to this crisis will result in more satisfactory outcomes.



DON'T RUSH TO BACK TO NORMAL

Early attempts to open cultural venues have potential to prevent quick recoveries, so results of these attempts would be exact opposite of their purposes.



KEEP IT ONLINE

Create online cultural contents which are satisfactory in terms of quality and quantity. Do not forget to focus on disadvantaged groups' limited internet access.



PROTECT THE CULTURAL SECTOR

Cultural sector and its actors have been adversely affected by the outbreak. Local governments need to take financial measures to protect cultural stakeholders and freelancers.



OBSERVE TRADITIONS

To be creative to ensure that people observe customs as they desire is one of the principal tasks of local governments nowadays.

1. ADOPT A CULTURAL RESPONSE PLAN

A framework and the process operating under this framework would most probably work better than disconnected local actions. A systematic approach to this crisis will result in more satisfactory outcomes. Since the beginning of the crisis, local governments have taken many measures, but the focus on the field of culture is seldom adequate. Putting culture on the agenda and developing a specific response plan including the provision of cultural services and the protection of cultural sector under these circumstances need to be the first step for local governments.

2. NO NEED TO RUSH BACK TO 'NORMAL'

As part of the measures local and national governments have taken, cultural infrastructures (museums, art galleries, concert halls, movie theaters, heritage sites) were temporarily closed down. Although it is depressing for many, these are necessary constraints. Any rush back to standards prior to COVID-19 may cause negative and unwanted corollaries like spreading of the virus. Early attempts have the potential of preventing quick recoveries, so the results of these attempts would be the exact opposite of their purpose.

Several political leaders from different parts of the world have already warned decision-makers not to rush to initiate the tourism flow. Cultural venues which have a serious tourism potential could tempt decision-makers to re-open them, however, any move that is motivated by profit-making rather than public health should be considered a deadly mistake nowadays.

This period of closure should be considered as an opportunity for maintenance and restoration/renovation of what cultural venues always need, but are mostly neglected due to visitor influx. People's demand for these venues should be met online tours and events temporarily.

3. KEEP IT ONLINE

Online platforms for the provision of cultural services during COVID-19 crisis have already been utilized by plenty of local governments. However, the quantity and the quality of the online contents are questionable in most cases. While some municipalities totally neglect online opportunities to reach citizens, many others use it in ineffective ways. Continuous and various online cultural contents would serve as a significant instrument to (1) enhance the quality of life of the residents staying at home and (2) create employment opportunities for agents of the cultural sector.

The quality of these contents constitute the second part of the case. Since the globalization, local cultural actors have had giant global rivals like TV networks and movie industries. In 2010s, streaming service providers like *Netflix*, *Hulu*, *Blu TV*, *Shahid* and so on have joined the race. According to recent studies, amid the pandemic, the number of subscribers of streaming service providers drastically accelerated. Even though local governments and local stakeholders mostly suffer from the lack of financial resources to compete with the global companies, improving the quality of online contents and making them appealing to people should be a priority for local governments. Moreover, many municipalities have rich archives and databases, and opening them to e-access would be a crucial step to achieve the democratization of culture and information.

“Keeping it online” also should call attention to the issue of internet access. Only 47% of the developing world are internet users. Among the disadvantaged groups like refugees, this rate is probably lower. We are living in a world that internet access and access to information are considered to be human rights. So, in an inclusive manner, local governments need to take action accordingly.

4. PROTECT THE CULTURAL SECTOR

As all other economic sectors, cultural sector and its actors have been adversely affected by the outbreak. Local governments need to take financial measures to protect cultural stakeholders and freelancers. The initial financial responses of local governments to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 may be:

- Not delaying the payment of already-signed contracts,
- Extending the social funds to the cultural field,
- Providing employment opportunities in online operations,
- Initiating grants for a quick recovery.

5. OBSERVE TRADITIONS

Due to lockdowns, curfews and restrictions on gatherings; people cannot attend religious services or celebrate religious and national holidays. The State of Palestine's *Commemoration of Land Day* or Christians' *Easter* holiday passed under these conditions. Currently, Muslims are observing the holy month Ramadan, and Ramadan holiday is going to follow it. However, in many countries, people do not have the opportunity to attend mosques, host *iftar* dinners or have family reunions. Religion and tradition constitute the backbone of culture. Local governments, as the closest level of government to people, need to seek alternatives to bring joy and spirit to families. Streets should reflect the spirit of the day rather than seeming as a dystopian scene. Being creative to ensure that people observe their customs as they desire is nowadays one of the principal tasks of local governments.

EPILOGUE

These recommendations draw an outline of possible short or middle-term cultural responses of local governments to COVID-19 crisis. Essentially, from a cultural perspective, local and regional governments have two objectives in these days that we are going through: (a) delivering cultural services (intellectual, religious, artistic etc.) to people, and (b) mitigating the financial impacts of the crisis on the cultural sector. In this regard, local governments can apply this guideline to their local circumstances and make it even more vigorous and dynamic.

#CulturalResilience



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