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Cultural access and activation: Civic participation in local sustainable communities

Anita Kangas and Sakarias Sokka

Introduction

The concept of sustainable development contains economic, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions. According to Throsby, within the framework of sustainability, culture can be viewed in both a functional and a constituent sense. The former includes arts, cultural products, and cultural industries, whereas the latter includes group values, customs, traditions, beliefs, values, and identity (Throsby 2001). As there are systematic differences in how people do, make, and say things, there also are different cultures (cf. Cahoon 2005). Lily Kong (2009) has defined *cultural sustainability* as “the ability to create local cultural content, embed indigenous idioms in cultural products, and, possibly, devise unique cultural forms that underscore a local sense of identity and indeed, nationhood, particularly in the face of globalizing and potentially homogenizing forces” (p. 3). The concept of cultural sustainability highlights the ability of culture to “forge a productive diversity for the human species” as well as to “nurture the sources of cohesion and commonality,” recognizing culture to be “the glue of similarity (identity; literally) that grounds our sociability” (Kong 2009, 3).

Cultural and social sustainability can be seen as closely intertwined. According to Kong, *social sustainability* means healthy social interaction, protection of the vulnerable, and respect for social diversity. It calls for systems, structures, and programs that allow “our participation as autonomous yet social beings” (Kong 2009, 3) and emphasises the social dimension of cultural activities whereby a socially sustainable cultural policy/activity is one that enables social inclusion and the building of community bonds. It is important to sustain the cultural traditions, beliefs, values, and fundamental convictions that constitute individual and collective identity within the limits of universal human rights. In the same way, preserving social institutions that govern production, education, political stability, and social coherence is essential.

An external norm arising out of thinking about sustainability is its ethical motivation –sustaining quality of life means preserving the elements of natural, social, and cultural capital that humans appreciate today as options for future generations. Thus, its justification is the principle of intergenerational equity (Throsby 2001). In terms of social equity, accessibility is a fundamental measure. It follows that the built environment and transport – for example, the key services and facilities – can have an impact on the extent and nature of accessibility in a given place. The aspects of everyday life to which residents and users need equitable access include education and training, decent housing, public services, (social) infrastructure, green space, culture, and recreation (Dempsey et al. 2011).

In this chapter, we are interested in access to, and participation in, culture as a part of quality of life and cultural sustainability. Participation is examined from an individual perspective as well as a structural one. An individual’s activities are the starting point in participation, but equally in focus are the frames that enable this participation, the societal mechanisms related to power and the exercise of power. Based on these premises, we review two different projects that make it possible for us to ask: (1) Who has access to cultural activities in Finnish municipalities, and who/which groups are excluded? and (2) How can cultural administrators and artists enable access, encourage inhabitants to participate in cultural life, and generate sustainable welfare in local communities?

The case of Finland

Cultural policy became institutionalised in Finland during the 1950s, at the same time as in other Nordic countries. During the 1970s and 1980s, the cultural sector was established as one of the public sector services. The division of responsibilities between the state and local government was built up like other welfare state services: local government has a crucial role in delivering and providing services, and the state regulates them through legislation and financial support. Cultural sectors cooperate with many other municipal sectors and voluntary associations. At the end of the 1980s, the ideas of New Public Management took root in Finland, and soon after came the financial recession of the 1990s (Honkapohja and Koskela 1999). Together, they changed the position of the cultural sector, especially in small municipalities (under 20,000 inhabitants) (Kangas 2003, 2004; Kangas and Vestheim 2011).

According to Kangas and Kivistö (2011), various forms of municipal diversification constitute a major challenge for local cultural activities because they have made the availability of cultural services more unequal. Public actors face conflicting pressures: services should be implemented efficiently and more cheaply, but at the same time increasingly take into consideration consumers' freedom of choice and needs. Furthermore, the inequalities in people's leisure time have become more evident during recent decades, when the role of the citizen has predominantly turned into that of consumer and buyer. In this difficult context, community-based and participatory approaches have become associated with the role of art, creativity, and cultural activities for community vitality and community planning.

Our analyses are based on original research findings from two sequential research projects conducted at the Unit of Cultural Policy of the University of Jyväskylä since 2011. The first project mapped people's arts and culture-related free time activities, and provided much-needed information about problems in accessing and participating in cultural services. The second project is a participatory action research project, still in process, in which research is harnessed to find solutions to problems in accessing and participating in culture.

Data and methodologies

The first research project, *Local Cultural and Sport Services: Access and Democracy* (CULTSPO), was based on interviews and survey results, both conducted in 2012. We analysed the interviews ($N = 167$) that were conducted in a small Finnish city (20,000 inhabitants) and the responses to an Internet-based survey ($N = 675$). For the survey, we collected replies from citizens who had experience in using local cultural services and were therefore capable of identifying problems in access and participation. The interviews provided more precise knowledge about people's motivation in using cultural services. We analysed the survey results with logistic regression analysis (see Table 1) and the interviews using content analysis (see Table 2).

The second project (launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture), *Activating Cultural Participation in Local Communities* (KUULTO), is an action research project that asks how to generate new and sustainable practices for the production of cultural services and how to encourage people to participate. It focuses on experiments being conducted in different parts of Finland between 2012 and 2015 by municipal cultural departments, associations, and a private company. The project deliberately focuses on municipalities in which the net costs for general cultural activities per resident are very low. The first call for funding of projects resulted in 188 applications, of which 22 were selected according to considerations such as the novelty value of the idea, the potential for increased access to cultural activities, the versatility of the activities, the existence of strong cooperation, the

idea's feasibility, and the sustainability of the operational models. As always in action research, the project also aims to change social reality although it is never certain that change will actually take place, and the change may differ from the original goal.

Participation in local cultural activities is unequal

The promotion of equality is a central aim in Finland's cultural policy. According to the CULTSPO survey, however, there are big differences in different groups' ability to access cultural services in Finland.¹ As shown in Table 1, social stratification cannot be overlooked in the use of cultural services. If you are a woman and have an academic degree, are older than 35 – and, especially, older than 55 – years of age, live in a city, and if you earn over 40,000 € annually, you are more likely to make four or more visits per year to *at least four* of the following: art galleries, cinema, dance performances, art/culture festivals, museums, libraries, opera, orchestras, and/or theatres. Women also have more culture and art-related hobbies than men.

Table 1. Access to cultural activities and feedback about cultural services

	Active visitor to art gallery, cinema, dance performance, art/culture festival, museum, library, opera, orchestra, and/or theatre	Regular and active art/culture related hobbies	Has given feedback on local cultural services
Sex			
Woman	1.00	1.00	1.00
Man	0.36***	0.41***	0.86
Age			
18-34	1.00	1.00	1.00
35-54	1.18*	0.97	1.82*
Over 55	2.06**	0.67	5.69***
University education			
No	1.00	1.00	1.00
Yes	2.76***	1.70**	1.27
Lives in			
City	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rural area	0.70	1.14	1.46*
Children live in the same household			
Yes	1.00	1.00	1.00
No	1.40	0.63*	0.94
Income per year			
< 20,000 €	1.00	1.00	1.00
20,001 – 30,000 €	0.99	0.50**	0.75
30,001 – 40,000 €	1.03	0.45**	0.92
> 40,001 €	1.65	0.42**	0.83

Nagelkerke R^2			
$N = 656$	0.16	0.12	0.13
*** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$			

Further, regardless of gender, not having children increases the likelihood of making visits. This relates both to the flexibility of time-use that people without children have, and to the higher cost of making visits with children. On the other hand, having children and/or low annual income increases the likelihood of having hobbies: children are more likely to have culture-related hobbies than adults, and hobbies are often cheaper than making regular visits to cultural institutions.

People over 55 do not have as many active hobbies as younger cohorts, but they are more active in making visits. Thinking about the organisation of cultural services, it is especially interesting that the older cohorts are much more eager to give feedback about their local services than younger people. Also, people living in rural areas are relatively active in giving feedback, even though they usually have far fewer opportunities to attend cultural events and visit art facilities in their own localities than city dwellers. It is perhaps easier to give feedback in smaller communities where the services are closer to inhabitants; it might also be that lack of services produces feedback.

Our results match up well with the results of earlier studies, according to which middle-aged, well educated women are the most active visitors, higher education and higher income predict a higher number of visits, middle-aged people are more likely to visit the theatre and attend concerts, and having no children in the household increases the likelihood of making visits to art and culture facilities and performances (e.g., Chan and Goldthorpe 2005; Christin 2012; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Galloway 2006; Liikkanen 2005; Minkkinen, Pääkkönen and Liikkanen 2001; Purhonen, Gronow and Rahkonen 2011; Stanbridge 2011; Suominen 2013; Van Eijck and Knulst 2005).

Compared to the rest of the EU, Finland and Scandinavia in general have the lowest average number of people who have not used any cultural services in 12 months. According to an EU-wide comparison of 34 countries, the number of residents who have used cultural services more than 12 times in the same period is highest in Finland (Eurostat – European Commission 2011). Even so, residents' opportunities to consume these services are not equal across Finland. Resources for cultural activities are unevenly distributed in Finnish municipalities because their willingness to invest in this area varies significantly (Kangas and Ruokolainen 2012). This observation is associated with the level of service provision and inhabitants' opportunities to participate in the activities. According to the data analysed by Statistics Finland, regional differences between Finland's densely and sparsely populated areas in the consumption of culture are among the highest in the EU.

Defining barriers to access

Our CULTSPO interviewees in a small Finnish city gave four sets of reasons for visiting culture facilities and/or having art and culture related hobbies: one reason was to improve their own competences,² another was connected to individual lifestyle, a third was to cement social identity, and the fourth – by far the most popular reason – was to improve mental and psychic well-being. The position of well-being was the same regardless of whether people were active in making visits to cultural facilities and art events, or in pursuing art and culture-related hobbies, or both. Considering the individual's level of well-being, the particular mode of culture-related activities is not as important as simply being active in some mode or another. Furthermore, the positive effects of cultural services reach beyond the

individual level. In our Internet survey, no less than 97% of respondents saw cultural services as important in increasing well-being and reducing social problems more broadly (Sokka et al. 2014).

Half (50%) of the interviewees in a small Finnish city were willing to increase their activity in hobbies related to culture and sport. They also offered many reasons for why they were unable to do so, and these were almost the same reasons our respondents to the e-survey gave for not participating in local leisure services. The biggest obstacles to access were: (1) content of the services is too established, or “not directed to me” (35% of respondents mentioned this), (2) opening hours are too restricted (30%), (3) prices are too high (26%), and (4) services are poorly situated (24%) (Sokka et al. 2014, 57).

Local residents also felt they were unable to influence municipal decision-making about the development of cultural activities. In our e-survey, a mere 23% of the respondents said that people in Finland have good opportunities to influence service provision (Sokka et al. 2014).³ People do not see themselves as having much power to remove barriers to accessing services (see Table 2).

Table 2. Attitudes to power in cultural and sport services (Internet survey)

Who in your municipality has the most power to influence culture and sport services? (mention the three most important in order from 1st to 3rd) (n = 675)	Mean (1-3)	Number of times mentioned among the three most important	Standard deviation
1. Municipal officers	1.58	517	.742
2. Local sporting clubs and sport associations	1.87	425	.773
3. Members of the municipal executive board	1.89	263	.768
4. Members of the municipal council	1.91	288	.782
5. Members of the sport and/or cultural committee	1.92	301	.726
6. Mayor	1.97	204	.815
7. Cultural and art associations and societies	2.06	269	.741
8. Private companies	2.28	221	.747
9. Citizens	2.40	208	.817
10. Residents' associations	2.41	167	.623

According to respondents, municipal officers have the most power to influence culture services. Kangas and Ruokolainen (2012) have reported that the staff of municipal cultural departments recognise inequalities in access to cultural activities: the elderly (in institutional care and far from city centres), young people, individuals with a physical or other disability, people living in remote villages and suburbs, people with a low income, the unemployed, people with a low educational level, and immigrants all have difficulties using cultural services. The barriers that the administrators identified were thus related to region, social status, language, age, and use of time. A third of them would like to bring cultural services to remote villages, suburbs, and social and health care institutions. They would also like to see a more positive attitude in cities toward local grassroots projects, but lack the means to improve the current situation.

Encouraging inhabitants

The CULTSPO project showed that municipal structures are not organised in the best possible way to enable social inclusion, build community bonds, or enhance people's

participation “as autonomous yet social beings” (Kong 2009, 3). When the current economic situation and administrative changes force municipalities to restructure their services, the restructuring seems to be carried out without reference to the feedback that people give (or, in many cases, would be willing to give but are not asked). As a consequence, the need for new kinds of participatory approaches is justified.

The aim of the KUULTO project was to increase participation in cultural activities. Different motivating measures were designed for those people who had not been active before. Increasing participation also implied encouraging these individuals to take part in making decisions about activities and evaluating them. The main idea was to lead them committed to the activities and their development. The project made use of the action research approach and the concept of *participation* based on the theories of Paulo Freire (1972) and Augusto Boal (2002). Freirean participation is defined as a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare. Principles of dialogue, interaction, problem-posing, reflection, and conscientization are important.

From this perspective, participation requires a new way of thinking from the actors in the experiment, that is, from the staff of cultural departments, residents, and those who evaluate the experiment. The question is how knowledge and information that can be gathered via resident participation and the development of activities could be taken into consideration within the operation (planning, budgeting, and administration) of the various municipal departments (Kangas, Jakonen and Havimäki 2014). Municipal officers are experts who possess the knowledge generally needed for service provision. When local residents participate, they add experience and value-based knowledge to the processes. Their inclusion in development work should be a given, particularly in strategic and operational areas. In addition to asking “what?” and “where?,” one also needs to ask “what kinds?” and “in what way?” (Sipilä, Bäcklund and Tyrväinen 2009, 48; see also Grodach and Silver 2012; Parker 2011).

As action research, the KUULTO project asked the core question: How have the needs of local residents been heard and interpreted? According to the responses received, the “customer-oriented way of working,” which is emphasized in all internal training in municipal administration, had been adopted at least rhetorically (see Clarke et al. 2007) and was highlighted by all the participants in the experiments. Service providers emphasized that if services are provided exclusively based on a top-to-bottom principle, local residents do not necessarily adopt the activities as integral parts of their lives.

At the organisational level, a traditional top-to-bottom bureaucracy presents obstacles to empowerment-based participation. Braye and Preston-Shoot (1995) listed some barriers they experienced in empowerment processes.⁴ One barrier relates to the organisation of services and the administration’s relationship with local residents. The experts fear that they may lose their status and power, that their professional skills might not be adequate, and that their expertise may be denied. They are suspicious about the clients’ readiness and emerging competence and emphasize the mechanisms that reinforce (jurisdictional) power through legislation and administrative terminologies. A common claim is that there is no money for the necessary changes. On the other hand, local residents may question the experts’ motivation and their authenticity. Residents are afraid of change and insecure about what to expect after a potential change. Therefore, it is difficult for them to join the processes.

Table 3 describes how the KUULTO project aimed to increase the accessibility of culture and break down barriers to participation. Barriers were organized into four categories: structural barriers, barriers to finding ways to have an influence, geographic barriers, and social barriers. The results showed how successful or difficult each process was in removing

the barriers (Kangas et al. 2014). The project also identified key challenges related to the various efforts that are expected from different administrative and political actors at all levels.

In attempting to overcome the barriers and improve knowledge-sharing practices, the KUULTO project found that differing demands for information call for different data-collection methods (Kangas et al. 2014). For example, the use of “cultural probes” was a fruitful method of gathering inspirational data about people’s lives, values, and thoughts. The probes are small packages that can include a variety of artefacts (e.g., maps, postcards, pictures, camera, and diary) along with evocative tasks, which are given to participants to allow them to record specific events, feelings, or interactions. The aim of using such probes was to obtain responses from families and thus stimulate the imagination of those responsible for organising cultural activities for them (see Crabtree et al. 2003; Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti 1999; Gaver et al. 2004).

Another successful way to encourage people to participate was discovered in one KUULTO suburb. The idea was to motivate people by providing them with new opportunities to share their memories. “Culture” was not exported to suburban areas; instead, the already existing yet largely hidden culture and heritage was strengthened. Residents told stories related to the naming of places in that particular area and specific to the local people. Cooperation between generations injected new perspectives into the debate: for example, new designations given by children concerning places that were important to them gave them new meanings for the whole community. This kind of transmission and slow transformation of knowledge between generations is important for cultural sustainability.

A related idea was the “box for memories” that makes the creator’s memories visible, and links memories across generations. The box was a collection of objects related to an individual’s life, linked to time, travel, work, and so on. Discussions based on the boxes strengthened the connection between generations and between community members. Choosing various elements to put into the box of memories also enriched relationships among family members. These memory boxes could also be used by healthcare professionals with those for whom they care.

In another situation, community artists in KUULTO used Augusto Boal’s (2002) “theatre of the oppressed” method, using theatre as a vehicle for participatory social change, and it proved to be very successful in removing social barriers. Thinking about local cultural policy development, one of the most important questions that arose from this experience is how municipalities could employ artists and enable them to work with marginalised groups on a more permanent basis.

Table 3. An overview of the first cycle of the KUULTO action research process and its main findings

	Actions taken by the KUULTO project to overcome barriers	Challenges
Structural barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration with other municipal sectors (cultural and social, health, education, planning) • Collaboration with the third sector • Project funding; new resources and hiring artists • Action research project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems in collaboration between municipal administrative sectors • Discontinuity of project funding • Problems in finding the right places for artistic work • After the action research project, how to continue reflexive bottom-up processes? How does the education system of professional artists respond to new kinds of demand? • What happens to newcomers?

Barriers to finding ways to have an influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach cultural work • Social media: Internet and blogs • Working groups for people at the grassroots level (associations, villages) • New ways to empower citizens: civic forums and panels, cultural probe as a method, feedback and assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much control and top-down practices • The directors are not able to delegate and do not allow younger people to make their voices heard • How to select members of working groups? • How can citizens' experience-based influence be transmitted to the planning and administrative processes of local government?
Geographic barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural activities and performances in villages and suburbs • Culture-bus and travelling performances • Collaborations with art institutions; bus transport to the performances • Professional artists mentoring, activating and making interventions in villages and suburbs • Community artists; cultural companions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to secure continuity for artists' work in small and remote locations? • Are there enough artists who would be interested in community art? • How could art institutions become more interested in overcoming geographic barriers?
Social barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural activities in retirement homes, hospitals, and kindergartens • Cultural activities for elderly people who live in their own homes • Cultural activities in urban marginalised communities and in rural and outlying areas • Cultural activities to promote well-being in workplaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impermanence in the cultural services • Getting directors of various sectors committed to new activities • Finding a common language between artists and other professionals • How to find new partners? • Tight schedules in social sectors' institutions and various workplaces

Conclusions

This chapter has investigated empirically the relation between participation in cultural services and barriers to accessing cultural activities. It involved a critical examination of the state of the art in local cultural policy and service provision in Finland. The overall purpose was to develop a conceptual foundation for investigating cultural participation. This involved applying the concepts of quality of life and cultural sustainability (including intergenerational equity, social equality, and empowerment) to the initial results of two research projects (CULTSPO and KUULTO) that are being conducted at the University of Jyväskylä.

According to these results, it is important to sustain the cultural traditions, beliefs, values, and fundamental convictions that constitute individual and collective identity within the limits of universal human rights and the demands of a global economy. These elements of culture are linked to the idea of sustainability in any local community that deals with questions like access, participation, and cohesion (see Dempsey et al. 2011). After all, without culture there would be no base for sharing the meanings that form communities. Cultural sustainability includes actions and issues that affect how communities manifest identity, preserve and cultivate traditions, and develop belief systems and commonly accepted values.

Yet much still remains to be done to foster cultural participation in municipal administration. There are large differences in different groups' access to and participation in

cultural services. People recognise flaws in contemporary service structures that prevent participatory activities from developing, but feel themselves powerless to influence the re-organisation of services. It is not impossible to remove the regional, social, and structural barriers that we have identified, but this cannot be done without new ways of organising the services.

Preserving social institutions that govern production, education, political stability, and social coherence is vital. However, lowering the walls of (cultural) institutions is just as crucial. For example, organising happenings outside the doors of institutions entails a new kind of professional collaboration between established artists and municipal officers. Strengthening participation also calls for new types of funding structures that could provide community artists with a reasonable salary. Furthermore, organising cultural activities with civil society actors in different settings would require more stable project funding and long-term strategies. Encouraging people to take part in developing their communities also calls for the acceptance of new actors in roles that have been occupied until now by those with identified administrative expertise in various areas.

Cultural facilities are fundamental for communities in promoting their culture, creativity, cohesion, and sustainability. Artistic processes play important roles in the societal transition to a more sustainable basis. Artists can create new spaces for dialogue and enable new ways of thinking, communicating, and building competencies that link cognitive and experiential insights. They catalyse shifts of societal consciousness, increasing both awareness and knowledge – collectively contributing to the transformation of individuals and communities over time.

Culture is a good in itself that needs to be preserved as the main component of personal and collective identity. Cultural sustainability as a normative concept relates art, creativity, and cultural activities to community vitality and community planning. Cultural beliefs and values are prime motivational agents for individual and collective actions; they co-determine the way that humans act in favour or against sustainability. If the preservation of certain goods is not embedded in the portfolio of what a culture prescribes as valuable, any attempt to enforce this preservation will be futile in the long run, even if force is being used. As much as we need to preserve natural, economic, and social capital, we are also in urgent need of nurturing the cultural capital that provides the basic motivation and ontological security for human beings.

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¹ Our logistic regression analysis demonstrates which factors in the e-survey data predict, first, active visits to cultural facilities and art events (i.e., at least four visits, at least four times during the last 12 months); second, engaging in active art and culture-related hobbies at least once a month (i.e., respondent does at least four art and culture related hobbies: reads a book; plays a musical instrument; sings, draws, or paints; writes poems, novels, or short stories; takes photographs; and/or dances); and, third, giving feedback about local cultural services.

² This however was not as much linked to success in working life (cf. Stebbins 2012) as in cultivating oneself and developing one's own skills for personal purposes.

³ Only 3% of respondents listed voting as among the best ways to affect service provision.

⁴ The original meaning of the term *empowerment* was political and related to activities against oppression (Freire 1972).