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Cultural Accessibility and Participation in the European Union

With negotiations underway for the next multiannual European funding programmes and the publishing of the new "Culture Compass," a window of opportunity has opened to embed cultural accessibility and participation for people with disabilities at the heart of the European project. This brief distills expert insights from the MuseIT project's activities and policy roundtables into a strategic analysis and a set of targeted recommendations for policymakers.

The core argument of this brief is that a fundamental shift is required: we should move beyond fragmented, project-based and individual-based initiatives to a systemic, rights-based approach to cultural accessibility. strengthening the democratic fabric and shared values of the European project itself. By ensuring that every person can participate in, contribute to, and enjoy culture, we affirm the Union's commitment to a truly inclusive society.

2. A rights-based approach to culture

To build a truly inclusive cultural landscape, accessibility and participation should be framed as fundamental human and democratic rights. This strategic reframing shifts the focus from accommodating specific groups to redesigning our cultural ecosystem to be inherently welcoming for all. It is a matter of ensuring that the cultural offerings co-financed by all citizens are, in fact, available to all citizens, including people with disabilities. This rights-based framework is built on three interconnected principles that expand the definition of access beyond the purely physical:

- **Culture as a vital component of social participation:** Access to culture is a prerequisite for full inclusion and active participation in society. It is the connective tissue that fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity.
- **Beyond physical access:** Openness is both removing barriers both physical and immaterial. It encompasses the ability to understand content, enjoy services, and participate fully in the cultural experience, from communication and signage to staff training and reception.
- **Informed and independent choice**: A cornerstone of cultural access & participation is providing clear, comprehensive, and accessible information. This empowers individuals to make their own informed, independent, and safe choices about which cultural experiences to engage with, based on their unique needs and desires.

3. Analysis of the current EU landscape: identifying gaps

Despite a shared commitment to inclusion, the current European policy, funding, and data landscape for cultural accessibility and participation is marked by significant gaps that hinder systemic

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progress. Analysis from the MuseIT project's policy briefs, corroborated by expert testimony, reveals a series of interconnected deficiencies that prevent the EU from moving from aspiration to implementation.

3.1. Policy and legislative fragmentation

A persistent gap exists between high-level discourse on "inclusion" and the lack of detailed, long-term EU policy focused specifically on accessibility and participation for people with disabilities. The first MuseIT policy brief finds that accessibility is not sufficiently highlighted at the EU level, often subsumed under broader, less actionable terms. This fragmentation is mirrored at the national level in many Member States where a disconnect between ministries for culture and those in charge of accessibility policies hinders the development of a cohesive, cross-sectoral strategy. This fragmentation is cemented by a policy omission: cultural participation is not recognized as an independent right in European Union disability strategies. This failure to explicitly codify cultural access as a right weakens its standing in policy debates and funding priorities. The new Culture Compass by the Commission proposes a “Report to support Member States in increasing the participation of and support to persons with disabilities in culture” to be ready by the end of 2028: while this a useful iniative, still actions at European level is needed rather than leaving the matter only in Member States hands.

3.2. Funding and Implementation Disconnects

Current funding structures contain a critical flaw: user co-creation is consistently "under-supported." This leads to solutions being designed *for* rather than *with* the very communities they are intended to serve. This disconnect results in a lack of relevance and sustainability. The danger is that excellent initiatives often become dependent on "single people" or short-term project funding. When that person leaves or the funding cycle ends, the initiative ceases, preventing the long-term institutional change, or "institutionalization," required for sustainable impact.

3.3. Deficiencies in data and digital infrastructure

Progress in digital accessibility is being hampered by significant data-related challenges. As identified in the second MuseIT policy brief, these deficiencies form a major barrier to innovation and interoperability:

- Lack of diverse and inclusive datasets needed to train and validate accessibility tools.
- Weak or fragmented metadata standards for describing accessibility features.
- Poor long-term preservation and reuse strategies for enriched cultural data.

The European Common Data Space for Cultural Heritage should be enhanced to better handle other types of data, specifically structured data on accessibility and participation for people with disabilities. Without a robust data infrastructure, efforts to scale up digital solutions will remain isolated and ineffective. These systemic failures in policy, funding, and data are not isolated issues; they are symptoms of a flawed, top-down design paradigm. Addressing them requires a philosophical and operational shift toward Universal Design.

4. The Universal Design: shifting from 'For' to 'With'

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Universal Design and co-creation are technical methodologies and part of a mindset needed to move from a paradigm of accommodation to one of genuine inclusion. This approach puts people, in all their diversity, at the very center of the design process. The most important element of this shift is the commitment to designing *with* people, not for them. This principle directly confronts the flawed practice of creating solutions based on abstract assumptions about a user's needs.

This collaborative process is crucial for bridging the "user-researcher divide." His experience in projects where researchers struggled to understand users and users struggled to understand researchers underscores the need for deep, empathetic, and sustained engagement. Co-creation is the only way to ensure that solutions are relevant, respectful, and genuinely useful. This human-centered philosophy is also essential for governing the role of technology, ensuring it serves as an enabler, not another barrier.The practical application of this philosophy is already visible in the varied approaches of different national frameworks and leading cultural institutions.

5. National Models and Institutional Change: Lessons from the Field

Examining different national approaches and institutional case studies provides invaluable, concrete evidence of both the challenges and successful strategies in implementing accessibility. These examples from across Europe demonstrate how policy frameworks and organizational culture can either enable or inhibit progress, offering powerful lessons for the path forward.

5.1. Contrasting National Frameworks

A comparison of national policies reveals the significant impact of legislative frameworks. The "mandatory" Accessibility and Discrimination Acts in Sweden and Norway give them a distinct advantage over Denmark's less formal, recommendation-based model. This mandatory structure provides cultural operators with clear legal responsibilities and drives institutional action, contrasting sharply with countries like France, which, despite having legislation, is described by experts as "very late" in effective implementation. The key difference lies in enforcement and political will: a mandatory framework transforms accessibility from an option into a core operational requirement.

5.2. Case Study: The Italian experience in practice

Italy provides compelling examples of proactive implementation. The journey of the Teatro Stabile di Torino offers a powerful lesson in organizational learning. They openly admit to starting their accessibility journey with "great ignorance," initially focusing on technology. They quickly learned that real success required building relationships and listening to users *before* implementing any tools. For their first accessible show, *Much Ado About Nothing*, they made a crucial error by forgetting to signal the interval, a powerful and humbling reminder that designing for an experience one has not lived requires deep listening, not assumptions. With this we understand that true accessibility is not about adding a feature but about fundamentally changing perspective to create a museum that "does not leave anyone behind."

5.3. The Necessity of Institutionalization

The most critical lesson from the field is the imperative to internalize and embed accessibility within the institution itself. Professionals agree about the need to build in-house expertise rather than simply

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outsourcing services. This strategic choice is essential to "change effectively the mentality and the company culture." This strategy of internalization directly addresses the critical flaw of unsustainability identified earlier, where excellent initiatives cease when a single champion or project grant disappears. By embedding expertise, the institution ensures continuity and transforms accessibility from a fragile project into a core operational value. This deep institutional commitment is the only way to ensure the sustainability and continuity of accessibility practices, making them a permanent part of an organization's DNA.

6. Strategic recommendations for a cohesive European Strategy

Derived directly from expert discussions, the following actionable recommendations for EU policymakers are targeted at key stakeholder groups. Their collective implementation can foster a cohesive, sustainable, and impactful European strategy for cultural accessibility, transforming principles into practice.

1. **Institute mandatory accessibility action plans**: all public cultural grants and capital projects funded by the EU should require mandatory, co-designed accessibility action plans. These plans must include measurable targets and be subject to annual progress reporting. This shifts EU policy from aspirational guidelines to enforceable standards, ensuring accountability and turning political will into measurable progress.
2. **Elevate Accessibility & Participation to a strategic funding criterion.** Accessibility must become a "mandatory and qualifying element" and a "strategic asset" in high-profile European cooperation projects and initiatives. This sends a powerful signal that inclusion is a non-negotiable component of cultural excellence. Italy's plan to implement this standard from 2028 provides a clear model for the EU.
3. **Standardize and Support Accessibility Data.** the EU should fund projects to develop core standards for accessibility metadata. Furthermore, it must ensure the European Data Space for Cultural Heritage is equipped to ingest, manage, and make this vital data exploitable, thereby creating the technical foundation for interoperable digital solutions at a European scale.

Read about the MuseIT project: https://www.muse-it.eu/
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