

VAHA

# The future of cross- cultural collaboration

Adapting geographies and mindsets for more resilient solidarity actions

*by* Farah Makki



Farah Makki  
"Future emerging from self  
reflection", Tandem Turkey  
Partner Forum, Tbilisi, 2018

## **The future of cross-cultural collaboration**

### **Adapting geographies and mindsets for more resilient solidarity actions**

“If you think you are too small to have an impact. Try going to bed with a mosquito in the room”. That is one of my favourite quotes from the “Board of innovation”. It just injects a bit of energy after a smile prints on your lips!

You may think there is no correlation. I hope you get the point by the end of the article.

For the moment, let's take it as a metaphor! Meaning your size isn't what counts more. Yet, it is your ability to be influential in the system of change. What does this mean?

Solidarity is a “Buzzword”. Since last year, it has been bringing people to assist and support each other, overcoming challenges and identifying solutions together. You may connect with many examples from your context. Speaking from the Italian side, the message “Andrà Tutto bene” - Everything will do just fine- represented a positive narrative; it helped keep our morale up in an uncertain moment.

Was it the truth?

Perhaps one of several truths, where narratives help us navigate a complex circumstance. It is also true for arts and culture players. Actors are wondering lately about the best way to compromise with the closure of borders. They are looking for new narratives to reconnect with the value of freedom, transparency and connectivity: How do we manage in Covid era? What have we learned this year? Are there any lessons to improve our practices? Were things done right for now? And more, why do we even engage in cross-border collaborations? What is the deeper purpose? Why is solidarity crucial? Does it affect our resilience? And, how can we advocate to recognize cross-cultural collaborations' role in achieving social justice and cohesion?

In this article, we share lessons-learnt and look out for future improvements. We share observations from the last VAHA thematic workshops held on 20 and 22 May 2021, coming from the stories of resilience in different local worlds.

Let's start. VAHA supports local cultural infrastructures in Turkey, Europe, and neighbouring countries. It provides opportunities for Arts and Culture actors to shape hubs. It is a platform to connect in their local ecosystem and set up links beyond their specific location.

“At the local level, in our daily life track, we don't have the time to think about

our local challenges. VAHA offers this space of stepping back to reflect. Reflect on our context, talk to others, share the struggles of social and spatial injustice and learn experiences of problem-solving from the other side”.

The challenges we face in our local contexts are more and more complex. We deal with increasing isolation, mobility restrictions and shrinking grants, which are sharpening the sense of “hopelessness” of cultural actors. **VAHA offers moments to look through new perspectives, understand trans-local issues and generate solidarity networks. It is a “safe space to ask uncomfortable questions”! A safe space that transforms into a “brave space”!**

How does this happen?

VAHA’s workshop starts with introspection. Participants review their personal and organizational bias. One key question: “How to (de)motivate ourselves?” The negative self-talk typically contains one of these thoughts:  
Generalization: I have already tried twice; I always failed!  
Rash conclusions: “No matter what we do will stay the same”!  
Self-blame: “I should have done it differently!”

Positive group talk helps to break the vicious circle of negative thoughts. During the VAHA sessions, actors shared experiences; they shared stories not to declare “all is great!”. Yet, to free themselves from negative thinking. How did this happen? Instead of saying: We will never manage? They asked: **“How to avoid hopelessness to support new narratives of change?”**

“I cannot change anybody else. I can change myself, then change follows you: It can be a tiny small step, then hope will become bigger. Yes, we deal with many challenges; the absence of support at the state level doesn’t help. Yet, we keep working in the field and involve people through small and simple actions. For example, in the hub activity, we are working with internally displaced people. That is change-making!”

This quote embodies the Theory of Change: **start by yourself, influence others and multiply the actions for change-making!**

And, LISTEN!

“This is as good as it gets”.

“The Art of Thinking Clearly” and “The Communication Book. 44 Ideas for better conversation every day” are two books I have been reading in the last year. I looked to understand some dynamics I saw, or to answer questions I raised on the

role we can play in addressing the complexity of social challenges. How culture contributes to sustainable development goals and social justice? I use, here, some concepts to deliver some tips. Or even tricks to unfold the lessons that emerged from the workshop exchanges.

In the Theory of Change, every actor can make actions at the level of behaviour, lifestyle before influencing others and helping the system change. Where does this change happen, at the personal or single organization level? And how can these specific changes be influential?

First, the world is too complex to make it alone! Second, cross-cultural collaborations can help. How can we proceed? It starts by recognizing the BIAS that we hold and by acting at these four levels:

## **1. Adaptive geography**

Acting with a variable understanding of “cross-cultural”  
geography

## **2. Critical thinking of assumptions on Cross-cultural collaboration**

Cultural humility & (In)visible borders  
Un-bias Truths

## **3. Adaptive action**

Slicing complexity to understand and define priorities

## **4. Power of Networks & stepping into Policies**

Shifting from simple collaboration towards collective impact  
Advocating beyond the bubble  
Mainstream your Narratives

**FIRST: ACTING WITH A VARIABLE UNDER-  
STANDING OF CROSS-CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY**

Before getting into the details, we need to approach cross-cultural collaboration and cultural geographies beyond, first, nation limits, second, beyond international focus, and, third, beyond the standardization of local challenges. The current global health crisis has led to a crystallization of mobility control and the increase of security rhetorics. Borderlines are being visibly multiplied – in typology and scale – at the neighbourhood level, the city, the region, and the nation. The restriction on movements is making access to opportunities harder and is affecting social justice values. According to actors and their local contexts, the missing values are: access to economic opportunities, security, sustainability, diversity, representation of the rural population, acceptance, inspiration, human rights, power balance, trust, transparency, and reliability of the information, visibility of groups, recognition of problems at the local level, identity, poverty, and equality.

6 Priorities, urgency, and the pathway for change vary according to the political and social dynamics of the context. “In Eskişehir, the local authority is strong; they do their best. Still, injustice is strong; a high number of refugees live here. With the growing gentrification, they force them to move to the periphery”! While, “in Diyarbakır, there is a lack of access to local authorities. Many things are missing. Yet, still, we have a small group that can help each other. We have solidarity and public actions through art... Our work channels funding for children’s scholarships... during the pandemic, we lost connections to the Kids”. “In Cyprus, we were able, before the Covid, to cross freely. We had a café in the buffer zone. Now, the peacebuilding community is a bubble”.

Social and political ecosystems vary from one context to another. The challenges faced and increased by the Covid are to address by having a differentiated and comprehensive understanding of place dynamics. Cross-cultural collaborations, as VAHA programs, that aim to support agents of change in local settings hold a dichotomy: On one hand, the diverse and unique local scale; on the other hand, the common ground of international exchange. How does the program bring an added value to local contexts? Does it support collective impact through networking? And, how does it adapt to the needs of Art & Culture actors?

The pandemic has affected cross-cultural collaboration and community-based processes. The shift into the digital space gave, however, visibility to many territories. Some were less visible before. The Covid period also shifted the priorities of local actors, looking to counter urgent challenges in their living environments. The mission-driven or even advocacy-oriented practice is becoming more present.

## THE FUTURE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION

Arts & Culture actors are more focused on their environment. The international action is capturing a second attention.

These changing geographies and priorities call to re-explore the future of cross-cultural collaboration and mobility. New perspectives are to bring to unlock new opportunities or new practices.

**VAHA's workshop gave space to reflect on these new boundaries. For the participants, borders operate beyond physical space: in mindsets (Tina<sup>1</sup>), in language barriers (Mudar<sup>2</sup> and Stella<sup>3</sup>), or in the ability to connect local action to a systemic change (Zoya<sup>4</sup>), act for social justice or sustainable development (Farah<sup>5</sup>), freedom of expression (Olena<sup>6</sup>), and peacebuilding (Alden<sup>7</sup>).**

So what  
did we  
learn  
about

*the future of cross-cultural collaboration and  
solidarity?*

**CRITICAL THINKING OF ASSUMPTIONS ON  
CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION**

**“Cross-border is not only about geography”.** We need to use the term border like a metaphor; we need to explore it through the complex dynamics of operation and action”.

Actors call to rethink the spatial criteria in cross-cultural collaboration and liberate the geography of action from the limited definition of the international sphere. Cross-cultural geographies can happen within the geographic limits of one country or even one city. Several actors advanced the nuances to find in small cities’ cultures, in rural contexts, or even in peripheral areas and buffer zones. Cultural differences have no physical limits. Differences can include dynamics of identity, recognition, religion, economic status, professions, and belongings. All these factors are to be considered.

Some places, like Diyarbakır or Nicosia, carry the historical weight of conflicts. They witnessed the marginalization of some communities. Conflicts have divided the population. And most times, reconciliation is hard to happen when historical events fall into oblivion. Cultural tensions become suspended voices. You never know when and how violently they can express their discontent.

**These are invisible borders!**

Cross-cultural programs offer a moment to unfold truths, to tell forgotten stories, meet the third side, and challenge the worldview. “Even when we think we are well informed, We discover: we ignored the entire story. That happens when we exchange with people from different backgrounds”. We shall think more and more about biases.

How cross-cultural collaboration helps overcome biases?

**Un-bias truths**

The Story Bias implies that whenever you hear a story, ask yourself: who is the sender? What are the intentions?

The actual issue with stories is that they give us a false sense of understanding, a partial or even distorted knowledge of facts which inevitably leads us to misinformation. The lack of good understanding can lead to miscommunication, then to conflictual dynamics. In the cross-cultural collaboration field, the media highly challenges the transmission of truth, and the establishment of intercultural diplomacy: “We work to maintain cultural diplomacy between Turkey and Armenia when there is no formal diplomacy. However, international politics and how the media covers the stories inevitably influence our collaborations and how they are received by the wider societies”.

Some Media weakens trust by polarizing the two sides. Yet, some cross-border methods in journalism give visibility to the third sides of a story. How?

- It tells the complete story.
- It compares and solves problems.
- It fights bias and stereotypes through fact-checking
- Be aware that “Big names are not always big news”, and seek invisible voices.

## The Story Bias? The Confirmation Bias?

*Un-bias truths...*

Hostwriter is one of these global online networks that help journalists connect. One of its members is Tina Lee. “Unbias the News” is her new newsroom. Tina provided us with an opportunity to discuss how a collaborative, cross-border mindset can apply in many fields besides journalism. “There are always multiple sides of stories across culture, language, not only across countries”. Whenever you report or hear a perspective, try to ask: Is it neutral? Is there any unconscious bias operating in the sent message? Looking at the use of language can reflect the intentions: calling people refugees or invaders reflect different senders!

“**The Story Bias**” goes hand in hand with “**The confirmation Bias**”. This second one happens when you interpret some information to fit your theory. Typically, it is about the blind-kind storytelling, the one not willing to recognize disconfirming evidence. Resolving

the confirmation bias implies an exchange with others to challenge your beliefs.

Cross-border collaborations aggregate people from all different backgrounds. They show how narratives and truths operate within a complex set of cultural and power relations. “We need to look at our own narrative bias before looking at the news... We need to break our Myths!”

In VAHA’s World Café, Alden Jacobs (Cyprus) and Olena Rosstalna (Ukraine) shared their experiences, also raised questions concerning the mediation of cross-border cultural work in building new narratives in conflict zones. Alden is the co-founder and director of program development at Visual Voices, and Olena is the artistic and stage director of Youth Drama Theatre.

Olena starts: When the war stopped seven years ago. Young people wondered about the narrative to use in storytelling with their past or present. How do they story-tell their identity when the narrative changes from person to person? How to listen to over two sides and avoid polarization?

“We want to make a new narrative to identify ourselves in a recent present, by opening the space for the 3rd side of the story”. Sometimes the proposed narration may not connect to others; people may not find themselves considered or included. Stories shall remain open and break myths. Olena’s ART and MEDIA HUB in Chernihiv operates as a space for voicing out these third stories by:

1. Raising media literacy of the community to prevent the negative influence of hybrid war and hate speech.

## SO WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT

2. Sharing the stories of groups of people who usually stay invisible in Ukrainian society.

3. Self-expression in drama, visual art, video production.

Cross-cultural processes produce alternative narratives, starting beyond stereotypes or prejudices. The Middle Eastern Film Festival, at Ankara Hub, is another example. The event offers a moment of encounter: people share different narrations of the Middle East, liberating personal stories from Orientalisation and clichés! This opens the door for more open-ended narratives, more inclusion!

**“There are no borders, just different knowledge to share”.**

“If you put different sides together, you might understand the other side better”. Somehow, cross-cultural collaborations help to cross the border of relationships by building trust among actors, well before projects come along. “In 3 years we connected with over 100 organizations in different countries, we exchanged, and learned from each other, we can build on that”.

The hub in Nicosia works internationally with local-focused projects. They collaborate with people from north and south of Cyprus. For them, arts and cultural practices are mediums for peacebuilding, and solidarity. They are means to shape understanding and reflect through constructive dialogue and multiple views. Nicosia hub focuses on three aspects to meet their objectives:

**Where does the action happen?** Actors run artistic residencies in the city buffer zones. People come together from divided sides of the city. (choice of a strategic location)

**How does the action happen?** Artistic and cultural activities are community-driven. They offer a process for community participation to support behavioural change. (community component)

**And Why does the action happen?** They run peace education workshops in schools, with NGOs, where students share messages with another community through arts. Narratives and Artistic Mediation are a medium for peacemaking and Educational Pathways. (artistic mediation for peace education)

## **ADAPTIVE ACTION SLICING COMPLEXITY AND DEFINING PRIORITIES**

### ACTING LOCALLY FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

Nicosia Hub practices deliver an example of how local action of culture and arts practice can relate to systemic change. “Cross-border collaboration can be a tool to achieve a change in the system”. Zoya Lukyanova - deputy department coordinator at MitOst e.V, a network partner of the School of System Change at Forum for the Future - provides us with some tips:

- First: **cross-border collaboration is not just about you**, your project, or your partners. It is about how your partnership affects the entire system; how your co-creation changes and takes on new qualities to address the challenges in the system.
- Second: **recognize your civic courage!** Making cross-border collaboration despite authoritarian regimes is a manifestation of your civic courage. Build on this strength!
- Third: **intercultural collaboration sets horizontal governance;** work with cultural humility, at the same eye level, learn, adapt, bridge capacities and interest.
- Fourth: Around the globe, we face complex problems that call for the intervention of more than one sector or one country. **We shall stop acting alone.**

The pandemic demonstrates the interdependence of the world and different provision systems. Challenges like social justice, or even climate change, require a shift in mindset, switching from simple collaboration to collective impact. Cross-border collaborations are, even more than ever, an essential framework to help resolve the challenges of our Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous environments.

### **The Paradox of choice**

Yet, too many choices destroy the decision. Netflix is a good example: you check many movie options, and it ends up watching nothing.

As mentioned above, we live in highly challenging contexts of different types. It is very difficult to address them all, especially at the same time and in a short period! Within less than two years of a cross-cultural collaboration project, don't expect to resolve all the challenges. The more choices you decide to have, the more you are unsure about what action to take. The more you are unsatisfied, the more you don't move forward. Then, how can we proceed?

There are existing frameworks that help us navigate the complexity of addressing social and environmental injustice. The 2030 Sustainable development agenda

(SDGs) delivers a set of goals and targets. It is a tool to approach the different layers of social and environmental vulnerability. The framework offers a guideline that can help local actors shape their strategic development scenarios and prioritize. More often, the role of culture and cultural practices in achieving SDGs is subject to structured dialogues and new tools (e.g. UNESCO Culture 2030), aimed at facilitating the translation of global targets and indicators into a more local scale. Some other frameworks like the “Design for Social Justice Index” (Harvard Just CityLab) offers another tool to get more concrete in ideating spatial action. It helps actors in the analysis at a smaller scale of spatial justice or injustice patterns (at the neighbourhood level or even street scale). Scaling and filters can help us develop complex reasoning, by slicing it into thematic priorities and steps for action(s).

Many of the actors can be overwhelmed by the fear of a big task. Through thematics and matrices, we can think carefully about what matters; decide about what value we want to work on before investing or designing on the project logic of intervention.

As they say in “the salami tactic”,

**“Disassemble a truck into small parts and a child can carry it!”**

In my work, I usually support local authorities and cultural stakeholders in designing integrated, participatory policies and development actions. Each context has priorities, urgent challenges, and causal relationships to address through different strategies for intervention. A short-time project or a collaboration usually embraces one strategy among multiple ones. It addresses

a dimension of the problem. It contributes to a step towards the change of behaviour and attitude of the entire system. Usually, we call it a Logical framework! An Impact chain starts with the activities to deliver outputs, influence outcomes, and indirectly contribute to the higher goal at a larger scale (related to structural policies, social, economic, and political conditions, SDGs).

We can hardly make a perfect choice! We learn to make a “good” choice, good enough to reach a specific goal that matters. The reason cross-cultural collaboration objectives shall be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bounded!

In the workshop on cross-cultural collaboration and actions for social justice, I invited the participants to test a tool. A tool that helps them slice the notion of social justice; decide on priorities and future interventions! The ultimate aim was to deliver insights for cross-cultural collaboration strategies that support their effort in driving local change. Arts & culture actors tested the “Design for the Just City Index” (Harvard) and answering these two questions:

1- How and what spatial injustice increased in your place because of Covid and cross-cultural collaborations shift?

2- What ‘just city’ values are missing? (choose 1 to 2)

Here are some stories and some values:

- 01. Access & diversity:** “Cross-cultural collaboration is regularly in interruption. We can access only limited audiences. The participation and energy of art are missing online”.
- 02. Participation:** “The lack of economic support by the government is affecting every layer. All art venues are completely shut down. The students in the city also left; they went back to their home cities, meaning we are also missing the connection with our audience”.
- 03. Inspiration, tolerance:** “The lack of inter-cultural spaces are preventing ‘inspiration’ and talents from being expressed. Artistic mediation affects perceptions, especially in peacemaking or challenging stereotypes. We have fewer shared perspectives, continued misunderstanding, and then more and more risk for perpetuated conflicts.”
- 04. Freedom of expression, representation:** “In the name of security, freedom of expression is shrinking at city and country level. Protests Access & diversity: “Cross-cultural collaboration is regularly in interruption. We can access only limited audiences. The participation and energy of art are missing online”.
- 05. Community and cooperation:** “Regulations are also making the use of parks harder. Encounter between diverse groups becomes harder too”. The neighbourhood scale becomes more and more relevant. It is where the community feeling takes form. In Eskişehir, new cooperatives appear.
- 06. Trust, transparency:** in Diyarbakır, people use the parks more often in Covid time. Public spaces became more crucial for the city. Yet, dynamics of mistrust in power lead to disobedience, which does not help the health situation: People do not follow the rules set by the government. The lack of transparency and misinformation has led to mistrust. And more, some neighbourhoods in Diyarbakır do not follow regulations because Covid is their last concern... poverty being their major challenge.
- 07. Inclusion, representation, and prosperity:** In Antalya, there is a lack of inclusion of the rural population in planning economic opportunities related to tourism. Big cities absorb all the support! Which increases the marginalization of rural communities and identities.

Based on concrete stories, participants observed the spatial (in)justice patterns in their familiar environments, then selected the most missing values and the most urgent challenges to address. They took time to reflect on local issues, compared different contexts, and sliced social justice understanding into specific values. Actors reported different needs that require different strategies of intervention. In the next step, they elaborated potential scenarios of social-impact driven cross-cultural collaborations. At the centre, we find a common aim of improving some conditions of social justice in their living contexts!

How might we shift from simple collaboration towards collective impact in the frame of cross-cultural collaborations?

### **POWER OF NETWORKS & STEPPING INTO POLICIES**

#### ADVOCATING BEYOND THE BUBBLE

“Since yesterday, I have been thinking of transforming safe-space into brave space”.

Cultural sectors and practices have the power of aggregating people from different backgrounds in unique ways. They explore the flow of dialogue and expression, through mediums of arts and culture. They do it to speak about serious questions and challenges: violent conflict, cultural tensions, social abuses, inequalities, sustainability, etc. By bringing together evidence-based experiences and stories, the cross-border setting allows the diverse type of synergies :

**Alliances building & Advocacy actions:** “How to advocate the stories that are not typical cross-border collaborations? People are fleeing the oppressive regimes or are locked in prison. Solidarity here becomes more crucial to get out of the comfort zones and stand by with colleagues in trouble across borders. Sometimes the international community is more responsive than the local community to bring you support!”

Cross-cultural collaborations connect local agents with international allies to mainstream repressed narratives, making visible the forgotten and censored problems. International solidarity also provides moments to share alternative ways to tackle critical issues, plan the pathway for change-making, and advocate.

International funding shall support more these “solidarity talks” aiming at finding common solutions and mainstreaming alternative narratives.

**Knowledge transfer and stimulation for action:** Actors learn from each other about concrete solutions to common global challenges. “In residency: media and national perspective; people from all over the island come together, do research, exchange, and produce an art piece that speaks to the topic in the end”. Such production is a trigger for thoughts and conversations with people that are usually not exposed to some questions. “Solidarity talks prevent some issues from being forgotten. They keep them vivid, present, hot enough to keep the perseverance tones of actors”.

“People always need an example... If I see concrete examples of solutions from small cities like mine, I can/may start it in my community”.

**Empathy:** People listen, watch, observe, reflect, experiment with the work or the story proposed. They take the time to hear what is being told or expressed, understand the other side, elaborate their meaning, and exchange around; challenge what they hear, see, observe. A safe space where empathy creates access to new truths, narratives, and multiple perspectives on the same question and tolerates divergence of thoughts.

I recall here the story of Mudar and Stella in the Now-T-here project. Tandem Shaml program (2012-2013) meeting in Tunisia allowed a European cultural scientist to meet a Syrian playwright. Creative resistance became their leitmotif to speak loud about conflict. They processed an artistic piece in Beirut and Turkey, where they met and developed the collected stories from Damascus in war. The divergence in both belongings, working conditions, and approaches avoided tensions through flexibility and mutual understanding. Transparency and dialogue on needs and expectations helped them build empathy. From there, mutual trust and effort brought strength to both parties throughout the collaboration.

Tandem somehow allowed them to explore the power of **Framing**.

Good framing transforms a problem into an opportunity or a challenge into a resolution! It puts you on the side of a problem-solving attitude, not of the victim. The reaction becomes pro-action. You shift the state of thoughts.

The cross-cultural collaboration framework supports the development of change-makers’ mindsets. It sets a ground for emerging pro-active dynamics that fosters the transformation of local problems into opportunities for problem-solving. How?

Challenge **Opinions and Power!**

## SO WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT

We spoke above about how cross-cultural collaboration helps in “un-biasing” the news and accessing multiple truths. Intercultural dialogues make power and dominant opinions more relative. It raises awareness about voices that prevail. Often, hegemonic voices represent things as “the way they are” or the “normal” turn of things!”. These prevalent discourses discourage critical thinkers, who may find themselves overwhelmed by the dynamics of loud opinions related to power.

The positive side of intercultural dialogues relies on attracting the holders of voices that deviate from the mainstream. Programs, like VAHA, gather exceptions, offer a space of normality, of a right to be and to think differently from the hegemonic view. This permeability to diversity allows different sides of a story to be known and different sides of truth to be told. This diversity of opinions set the ground for change-makers to act for the respect of cultural diversity.

According to VAHA participants, this happens by:

- **Empowering** civil society actors to promote and protect human rights.
- **Advocating** for policy change, and escalating action for freedom of speech and civil rights.
- **Creating** space, physical and digital, for people to share ideas, learn from other contexts and feel support from other initiatives.
- **Establishing** synergies in the cities to allow stakeholders to hold on together and create networks of resilience.
- **Producing** artistic and cultural products that increase the visibility of local challenges.
- **Ideating** together the future of cross-cultural collaboration to make living contexts more socially just!

We need additional effort from funders and intercultural exchange programming to be more inclusive through giving attention to underserved areas, regions, and communities. For example, programs can include the cultural diversity of one country (urban-rural, intergenerational, rural youth, etc.) or by addressing “visa rejections that are increasing in Covid time”. “Funders can advocate or lobby to ease european visa processes for cultural actors and within cultural exchange frameworks”.

Yet, how to influence policy-making for changing the critical political, social, environmental, or even technological conditions of the places, cities, or countries mentioned before?

**“Being critical can also bring you under the lens of politics, and relate you to the people you dislike”.** “Trust relationships are crucial in working dynamics!” Yet, can trust and distrust, or like and dislike, work together?

Maybe yes, if we focus on the aim to achieve!

## For that, we need to understand policy frameworks to speak the language of funders and policy-makers; know what is out there, be political!

Cross-cultural collaboration can help to step into policies, offer opportunities to meet with advocates or policy-makers. To operate more efficiently, we need to overcome the **“Self-selection Bias”**. Self-selection bias operates when you act in a bubble searching for the other part! Which is indeed contradictory and unproductive! **If culture wants to speak policy, it shall include the other point of view, explore more permeable frameworks**, and be open to intersectoral approaches and policy insights. That is also true when we want to address issues related to rural population representation or underserved areas. Future programs shall involve actors and targets from these areas or agents being active in these areas.

Here we end with the Bias of **“la déformation professionnelle”**

“If our only tool is a hammer, all our problems would be nails” (Mark Twain). The law of instrument and the reliance on a familiar tool represent a bias we need to overcome when we want to show the role of culture in the sustainable development of our living spaces. Indeed, how to approach the relation between culture and social justice or even climate resilience without recognizing the limitation of “La déformation professionnelle” (professional deformation) and the complexity of a matter that goes beyond one field, beyond one side of responsibility, beyond one resource. Today, cultural actors and practices need to step outside the comfort zone and introduce new expertise into the circle of reflection and bring political mainstreaming and advocacy into their outcome agenda.

If you take a problem to an expert, you shall not expect the overall best solution. Expect an approach from the toolkit! Given our professional expertise, we already possess few tools. We need to add more, and take a new discipline view on the world.

Social injustice and sustainable development issues are wicked problems. We need to have more versatile tools to develop sharper thoughts and more systematic actions. Actions that look comprehensively across all involved dynamics to prevent future unpleasant events and promote sustained improvement. That includes a focus on continual learning and continuous improvement. The learning aspect requests intersectoral collaborations, while sustained improvements call policy change-making.

**Let's sum up now.** Continual learning and improvement inject a feeling of being alive, also growing in us and in our surroundings a sense of “stewardship”...

Stewardship qualifies the missions, driven by care, acting for concrete demonstrations. Whenever actors are diverse in needs and identity, they share their thirstiness and their perseverance to shape pathways for systematic change.

Transformational Pathways for sustainability rely on these intercultural actors. Cross-cultural collaborations are a magnet to bring them together and on board!

Maybe the story of the article ends here! I hope it leaves with many interrogations you may like to share.

**Greetings to the agents of change.**

**JUNE 2021**

**This article was produced within the framework of VAHA programme. VAHA is an initiative of Anadolu Kültür and MitOst e.V., funded by Stiftung Mercator and the European Cultural Foundation. VAHA partner consortium is in a collaboration with the iac Berlin to implement a series of ‘thematic workshops and network meetings’. We thank the Chrest Foundation for its support of travel related expenses. [www.vahahubs.org](http://www.vahahubs.org)**

### **List of Workshops input givers:**

1 **Tina Lee** is a member of Hostwriter, a global online network that helps journalists to easily connect across borders. She is head of publications and the editor-in-chief of their new newsroom, Unbias the News.

2 **Mudar Alhaggi** is a Syrian playwright, dramaturg and cultural manager, founder member of Collective Mallouba in Mullhiem an der Ruhr and Nawras e.V. in Berlin, lives in Berlin since 2016.

3 **Stella Cristofolini** is a cultural scientist, artist and cultural manager, and works on the interface of research/theory and artistic/social practice. Active in diverse local community projects and international exchange programs

4 **Zoya Lukyanova** is based in Berlin (Germany) and works as deputy department coordinator at MitOst e.V. Zoya has over 15 years of experience in the fields of international cooperation and impact-driven networks. She is currently a network partner of the School of System Change at Forum for the Future and part of German national pool of experts in the frame of Erasmus + Program with special focus on strategic partnerships.

5 **Farah Makki** is a researcher and consultant in participatory, evidence-based processes for sustainable urban development. She has been recently recognized as an URBACT ad-hoc expert driving change to better cities through Arts & Culture and delivering support to local authorities and other stakeholders in designing integrated, participatory policies. “Mediation Culture” represents her approach of blending city planning with social sciences to foster cross-cultural collaborations for inclusive living spaces in EU-MED region.

6 **Olena Rosstalna** is the artistic and stage director of Youth Drama Theatre “ AmaTea” (Ukraine). An actor of the VAHA hubs.

7 **Alden Jacobs** is the co-founder and director of program development at Visual Voices, (Cyprus). An actor of the VAHA hubs.