

**Cultural Management
Focused on Access,
Participation, and Cultural
Equality**

Cultural Management Focused on Access, Participation, and Cultural Equality

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Dedication

I dedicate these pages to the hope of a humanity capable of finding common ground beyond its differences, recognizing itself in sensitivity, thought, creation, and beauty. To a humanity that can enjoy, learn, and grow without origin, circumstances, or personal condition determining who has the right to participate in that which makes us profoundly human.

Because culture, intimate and sensitive, sometimes irreverent and even unruly, yet also profoundly rational, has the capacity to open paths where other resources cannot reach. It can awaken questions, nourish the imagination, educate the gaze, strengthen empathy, and remind us that no society is ennobled solely by what it accumulates, but by what it shares and makes accessible to all.

May we one day come to understand ourselves as a single humanity, diverse in our voices yet united in our dignity; a humanity that does not need great wealth to discover the greatness of living because it has learned to find in culture one of its deepest forms of freedom, knowledge, and human connection.

To the sensitive humanity, then.

To those who still believe that we can become better.

And to those who, through culture, dare to imagine it and make it possible.

Preface

There are ideas that transcend disciplines, institutions, and eras because they touch something essential in the human condition. Culture is one of them. It does not belong exclusively to museums, theaters, libraries, universities, or to those who have had the opportunity to engage with particular cultural resources. Culture precedes and extends far beyond all of these: it is present in the way we interpret the world, relate to one another, create, remember, imagine futures, and recognize our belonging to a human community. Therefore, speaking of cultural management should not mean speaking solely about the administration of activities, organizations, or resources. It means, in reality, asking what kind of society we wish to build and what place we assign to dignity, diversity, creativity, and each person's opportunities for development.

This book emerges from a deeply humanistic conviction: culture is not a luxury, but a constitutive dimension of human life. We all need to participate in culture, make it our own, transform it, and grow through it. Culture enables us to develop capabilities, construct identity, establish relationships, understand other perspectives, create memory, express emotions, produce knowledge, and expand the possibilities of our existence. Wherever a person can create, learn, interpret, participate, and be recognized, there is a concrete possibility for human development. Wherever these possibilities are systematically denied, a form of inequality emerges that has remained partially invisible for far too long.

From this perspective, cultural management assumes a responsibility far greater than that traditionally attributed to it. Managing culture does not consist solely of programming, budgeting, communicating, or administering cultural facilities. It means deciding who can access, who can participate, who can create, who is heard, who is represented, who receives opportunities, and who remains outside. Every cultural decision contains, explicitly or implicitly, a particular conception of society. Cultural management therefore cannot remain neutral in the face of inequality. It has the capacity to reproduce it, but also to challenge and transform it.

Cultural inequality deserves attention precisely because of its silent nature. A person may face evident economic difficulties while simultaneously experiencing less visible forms of deprivation: not having nearby libraries, lacking access to accessible spaces, not having time to participate, not feeling represented by cultural institutions, lacking opportunities to create, being unfamiliar with the codes of particular spaces, or perceiving that institutional culture was not designed with them in mind. These barriers are not minor. They affect people's ability to develop capabilities, establish relationships, build self-esteem, participate in collective life, and expand their personal and social horizons.

For this reason, this book proposes viewing culture from a broad, critical, and inclusive perspective. It is not enough to speak of access when physical access does not guarantee understanding, participation, or belonging. It is not enough to open an institution's doors if its languages, practices, prices, codes, or forms of representation continue to exclude. Nor is it enough to incorporate diversity into programming if diverse people do not also participate in decision-making, creation, employment, and management. Cultural inclusion begins when we stop thinking solely about bringing culture to people and begin creating the conditions to make culture with people.

This distinction is fundamental. For a long time, certain cultural policies and practices have been organized according to a predominantly top-down logic: an institution produces, a professional decides, and an audience receives. Contemporary societies, however, demand progress toward models capable of recognizing the creative capacity of diverse citizens, communities, and groups. The audience is not a passive mass. It is a potential community of participants, interpreters, creators, mediators, collaborators, and co-creators. The cultural management of the future will have to progressively abandon its obsession with merely counting attendees and begin to understand relationships, learning, capabilities developed, participation, belonging, and social transformation as well.

This perspective also requires us to broaden our understanding of who can be considered a cultural subject. People with disabilities are not merely recipients of accessibility policies; they are creators, professionals, managers, researchers, and producers of culture. Older adults are not merely recipients of intergenerational programs; they are bearers of memory, experience, and knowledge. Neurodivergent people do not simply need culture to adapt to them as visitors; they can contribute to transforming the very way in which we design cultural experiences. Rural, migrant, peripheral, or historically invisible communities should not appear merely as audiences to be incorporated, but also as legitimate producers of knowledge, memory, identity, and creation.

This conception inevitably leads to questions about power. Who decides what deserves to be programmed? Who determines which forms of expression are legitimate? Who receives funding? Who has access to professional circuits? Which communities are represented, and which remain absent? Which territories concentrate infrastructure and opportunities? Which forms of knowledge are considered valuable? Cultural management, precisely because it administers material and symbolic resources, participates in the distribution of power within society. It therefore needs to combine technical capacity with ethical responsibility.

Yet recognizing this responsibility does not mean turning culture into an exclusively normative or assistential field. It would be equally limiting to reduce it to its social function. Culture also possesses enormous economic capacity. Cultural

organizations, creative industries, heritage, design, the arts, communication, digital content, cultural tourism, and numerous activities connected to creativity generate employment, innovation, business activity, and territorial value. Nevertheless, their true economic potential should not be measured solely in financial terms. Culture is also a human-powered economic system: it mobilizes knowledge, imagination, talent, creativity, cooperation, and the capacity for innovation.

This idea is particularly important because it enables us to move beyond a false opposition between culture and the economy. Culture can generate wealth without being reduced to a commodity; it can produce economic activity without relinquishing its public dimension; and it can be financially sustainable without abandoning its social responsibility. The real question is not whether to choose between economic value and human value, but how to build management models capable of recognizing that both can reinforce one another when appropriate principles, objectives, and structures are in place. An economically sustainable cultural organization can expand its social impact. A socially relevant cultural institution can strengthen its legitimacy, audiences, partnerships, and capacity to generate resources. Cultural excellence and sustainability need not be adversaries.

We must also understand that culture maintains a profound relationship with our very nature. Human beings need not only food, protection, and safe places to live; they also need to give meaning to their existence. They need to tell stories, create symbols, transmit memory, celebrate, imagine, learn, express themselves, and recognize themselves in others. They need beauty, but also conflict, thought, humor, ritual, knowledge, belonging, and the possibility of transformation. In this sense, culture is not an ornamental complement to social life. It is one of the ways through which we construct our humanity.

For this reason, a truly developed society should not ask only how much its economy grows, how much infrastructure it builds, or how many services it provides. It should also ask how many people have genuine opportunities to participate in cultural life, develop their creative capabilities, access knowledge, find representation, preserve their heritage, and contribute to the production of new meanings. Human development loses an essential part of its meaning when this dimension is left out.

The journey proposed by this book begins precisely from this perspective. It starts with cultural inequality and the poverty of opportunities because genuinely inclusive cultural management cannot exist without first understanding the structures that produce exclusion. It continues with territory, heritage, infrastructure, and accessibility barriers because cultural opportunities are always situated in specific places and conditioned by resources, mobility, design, and context. It then moves toward organizations, projects, audiences, participation, and co-creation because culture requires institutions capable of translating principles into practices. It subsequently explores programming, governance,

public policy, economics, entrepreneurship, communication, legislation, technology, and evaluation because contemporary cultural management requires the simultaneous understanding of social, institutional, economic, legal, and technological dimensions.

The purpose is not to offer a single formula. Cultural management, like any complex human field, does not admit universal solutions or simple answers. What it can offer is a guiding orientation: managing culture means working to expand human possibilities. It means creating conditions in which more people can access, participate, create, learn, decide, and benefit from cultural life. It means understanding that an institution's excellence depends not only on the quality of what it presents, but also on its capacity to recognize those who have historically been excluded.

From a polymathic perspective, this task requires crossing boundaries. Cultural managers need to engage in dialogue with sociology and economics, anthropology and education, law and public administration, psychology and technology, territorial studies, public policy, communication, and the creative industries. But they also need something that no degree can guarantee in itself: sensitivity. Sensitivity to understand that behind every audience are individual biographies; behind every barrier is a concrete experience; behind every indicator are people; and behind every budgetary decision opportunities are being distributed.

This sensitivity does not mean abandoning rigor. Quite the opposite. Cultural management committed to society requires evidence, planning, evaluation, transparency, and accountability. It needs to know what works, for whom it works, under what conditions, and with what consequences. It needs to measure without reducing reality to numbers and assess without relying on unsubstantiated intuitions. It needs to combine imagination with method, creativity with responsibility, and vision with the capacity for implementation.

Ultimately, the challenge is to build a truly shared culture. A culture in which disability is not an exception, diversity is not a communication strategy, territory does not determine opportunities in advance, social background does not close the doors to knowledge, age does not limit participation, differences are not obstacles to belonging, and cultural institutions are not spaces reserved for a few, but places where society can recognize itself, question itself, and reinvent itself.

Culture possesses this extraordinary capacity: it can preserve and transform at the same time. It can safeguard memory while opening futures. It can generate identity without erecting boundaries. It can generate economic activity without losing its human dimension. It can strengthen communities, stimulate critical thinking, create employment, foster innovation, and improve quality of life. But none of this happens automatically. It depends on how we manage it.

Hence the responsibility of those who work in this field. Cultural managers do not merely administer resources; they administer opportunities. They do not merely organize activities; they shape possibilities for encounter. They do not work solely with cultural assets; they work with memories, identities, expectations, and human aspirations. They do not merely manage institutions; on a small or large scale, they participate in constructing the kind of society those institutions represent.

This book therefore begins with a simple yet demanding idea: culture should be accessible to everyone because it belongs to everyone, and everyone should be able to grow through it because cultural growth is also human growth.

Whether cultural management can become that bridge—between people and opportunities, territories and knowledge, memory and the future, creativity and development, economics and dignity—will depend on our ability to understand it not as a peripheral field, but as one of the fundamental infrastructures of a genuinely human society.

That is the horizon of these pages: ethical, inclusive, sustainable, professional, creative cultural management oriented toward impact; management that asks not only what culture we offer, but also for whom, with whom, how, why, and what it is intended to transform.

Because managing culture, at its core, means managing one of the deepest dimensions of our possibility of being human.

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Introduction

Culture constitutes one of the deepest expressions of our human condition. It is not a luxury reserved for those who possess certain resources, educational levels, or social positions; nor can it be reduced to a set of cultural goods, activities, institutions, or industries. Culture permeates the way we interpret the world, build relationships, construct our memories, express our emotions, develop capabilities, imagine futures, and give meaning to our collective existence. Participating in culture, creating it, learning it, transforming it, and transmitting it are all part of what makes us human. For this reason, speaking about culture also means speaking about dignity, freedom, equality of opportunity, and each person's genuine possibility of achieving full development within society.

From this perspective, cultural management assumes a responsibility that extends beyond organizing activities, administering institutions, or producing cultural events. Managing culture means intervening, consciously or unconsciously, in the distribution of opportunities to acquire knowledge, participate, create, express oneself, encounter others, and construct meaning. Every decision concerning what is programmed, where it takes place, whom it is intended for, who can access it, who receives funding, who is visible, and who remains on the margins produces social effects. Cultural management, therefore, is never entirely neutral: it administers resources, but it also distributes possibilities; it connects institutions, but it also shapes relationships; it safeguards heritage, but at the same time decides which memories receive recognition; it develops audiences, but it can either reproduce or challenge existing inequalities.

This realization compels us to view culture from a broader and more demanding perspective. For a long time, a substantial part of cultural policies and practices has tended to focus on supply, institutions, and the production of cultural goods, assuming that expanding such supply would automatically lead to greater democratization. Yet the existence of a theater, museum, library, cultural center, or digital platform does not in itself guarantee that everyone can access, participate in, or feel represented by them. Between the existence of a cultural opportunity and its effective appropriation lie numerous material, educational, territorial, physical, sensory, cognitive, communicative, technological, symbolic, and social conditions. Cultural inequality emerges precisely within the space separating formal rights from real possibilities.

Understanding this inequality requires recognizing that conditions of access to culture are deeply connected to economic and social conditions, but cannot be reduced to them. A person may have sufficient income and still face territorial, educational, cognitive, or symbolic barriers that limit cultural participation. Likewise, a community may possess an extraordinary wealth of cultural

expressions while lacking the infrastructure, resources, institutional recognition, or circulation mechanisms necessary for their development. Cultural inequality therefore has a distinct dimension of its own: it is manifested in who can enjoy meaningful cultural experiences, who has opportunities to learn and develop cultural capabilities, who can create and pursue a professional career, who is represented, who has a voice, and who participates in decisions affecting their own cultural life.

Speaking of cultural inclusion therefore means much more than facilitating entry into a space. A genuinely inclusive perspective requires asking who is present, who is absent, why they are absent, and what transformations are necessary to ensure that cultural participation can be genuinely open and meaningful. Inclusion means recognizing human diversity as a constitutive feature of society rather than as an exception requiring supplementary measures. People with disabilities, older adults, those living in peripheral or rural territories, culturally diverse communities, people with different ways of learning, perceiving, and communicating, and all those groups historically distanced from particular cultural circuits should not be conceived merely as beneficiaries of inclusive policies. They are citizens, audiences, creators, professionals, managers, researchers, knowledge holders, and legitimate protagonists of cultural life.

This transformation in perspective leads to an essential idea: it is not enough to make culture for people; it is necessary to build culture with people. The difference is profound. Making culture for others can leave decision-making structures intact, whereas building culture with others involves sharing knowledge, authority, design, and responsibility. Participation then ceases to be an instrumental resource intended to improve acceptance of a project and becomes a democratic principle of cultural management. Mediation, co-creation, cultural laboratories, community projects, and participatory methodologies acquire meaning precisely because they enable individuals to move from the passive position of recipient to that of an active cultural subject.

This conception also requires us to reconsider the meaning of heritage. Heritage is not merely what an institution preserves, classifies, or exhibits. It is also what communities recognize, transmit, reinterpret, and re-signify. Tangible and intangible heritage, industrial heritage, territorial memories, everyday practices, forms of knowledge, languages, narratives, and symbolic expressions form part of a dynamic cultural inheritance. Managing it responsibly means protecting it without freezing it, studying it without appropriating it, and enhancing its value without turning it exclusively into a commodity. Heritage can be a source of cohesion, identity, and local development, but it can also become a mechanism of exclusion when certain memories are rendered invisible or when territories are culturally transformed without the participation of their communities.

The territorial dimension is equally decisive. Culture does not occur in the abstract. It occurs in cities, neighborhoods, towns, rural areas, peripheries, and specific communities, and is conditioned by distance, mobility, transportation, infrastructure, connectivity, and the distribution of resources. The cultural geography of a society often reveals its deepest social inequalities. Where facilities, professionals, networks, funding, and opportunities exist, possibilities for participation multiply; where these elements are scarce, opportunities diminish. Decentralization, proximity, and investment in cultural infrastructure should therefore also be understood as mechanisms of territorial justice.

Culture, however, is not solely a social dimension. It is also an economic system of enormous human potential. Cultural and creative industries, cultural enterprises, entrepreneurship, artistic production, heritage, design, publishing, communication, audiovisual industries, cultural services, and a broad constellation of activities linked to knowledge and creativity generate employment, innovation, identity, economic value, and development opportunities. Nevertheless, reducing culture to its economic profitability would be equally insufficient. The true power of the cultural economy arises precisely from its dual nature: it produces economic value because it first produces human value. Creativity, imagination, cooperation, knowledge, expression, and the capacity to construct meaning are economic resources, but they are also essential capabilities for individual and collective life.

For this reason, sustainable cultural management cannot be limited to ensuring the financial survival of organizations. It must simultaneously consider their economic, social, institutional, environmental, and human sustainability. A financially solvent cultural organization that is socially exclusionary does not represent fully sustainable management. Likewise, a cultural institution capable of expanding its audience but unable to care for its workers, protect heritage, or operate transparently embodies an incomplete form of sustainability. Contemporary cultural management requires strategy, leadership, planning, financing, communication, innovation, evaluation, and ethical responsibility to be integrated within a single vision.

This vision also demands a mature relationship with power. Who decides what deserves to be shown? Who determines which forms of expression receive resources? Who establishes which forms of knowledge are legitimate? Who has access to leadership and decision-making positions? Who gains visibility and recognition? Who can transform their creative capacity into a sustainable professional career? These questions reveal that culture is permeated by relationships of symbolic, economic, and institutional power. Cultural democratization does not simply consist of increasing the number of consumers; it also means democratizing the conditions of production, representation, financing, recognition, and decision-making.

In this context, public policies and cultural governance acquire central importance. Public administrations do not merely finance activities or manage facilities; they create frameworks of possibility for cultural life. Cultural rights, public planning, grants, procurement, interinstitutional cooperation, decentralization, citizen participation, and international cooperation form part of an architecture that can promote equality or reproduce privilege. The quality of a cultural policy should therefore be measured not solely by the number of activities carried out, but by its capacity to expand rights, reduce inequalities, strengthen capabilities, generate participation, and produce sustainable social value.

Digital transformation introduces new possibilities and new challenges. Technologies have greatly expanded the ways in which culture can be produced, distributed, preserved, and experienced, but they have also created new inequalities. The digital divide, technological competencies, accessibility, intellectual property, platform concentration, algorithmic content circulation, and the growing use of artificial intelligence require us to rethink the role of cultural management. Technological innovation can be considered genuinely transformative only when it expands human capabilities and reduces barriers to access and participation rather than deepening new forms of exclusion.

All of this also requires a culture of evaluation. Managing should not mean acting perpetually on intuition, but learning from evidence, observing outcomes, listening to communities, measuring impacts, and correcting decisions. Cultural indicators should not become a quantitative obsession or reduce culture to decontextualized figures. Their most valuable function is to help us understand who participates, who remains excluded, what changes occur, what resources are used, what economic and social effects are generated, and what transformations are necessary. Evaluation, understood in this way, is not the endpoint of a project but a tool for institutional learning and continuous improvement.

This book begins with a simple yet demanding conviction: a culturally developed society is not one that possesses more institutions, more events, or larger cultural budgets, but one that succeeds in enabling more people to fully exercise their status as cultural subjects. An advanced society is one in which culture is not a concentrated privilege, but an open space for learning, creation, encounter, memory, participation, and human development. A culturally mature society does not ask merely how many audience members attended, but what new opportunities were created, what barriers were removed, what voices were incorporated, and what capabilities were able to develop.

From this perspective, cultural management emerges as a profoundly interdisciplinary field because it needs to engage with economics, sociology, education, anthropology, law, public administration, psychology, communication, technology, territorial studies, and management sciences. Above all, however, it needs to engage with people—with their needs, capabilities, memories,

differences, and aspirations. The contemporary cultural manager should not be merely an efficient administrator of cultural resources, but a professional capable of understanding contexts, identifying inequalities, bringing stakeholders together, facilitating processes, managing organizations, interpreting territories, and creating the conditions necessary for culture to realize its transformative potential.

The twelve chapters comprising this work trace precisely this horizon. They begin with cultural inequality and the poverty of opportunities and move toward territory, heritage, accessibility, and inclusion; they explore the leadership and sustainability of organizations, project design and evaluation, audience development, mediation, participation, and co-creation; they examine programming and power relations; they address governance, public policy, economics, entrepreneurship, communication, and sustainability; and they culminate in the ethical, legal, technological, evaluative, and impact-related challenges that define contemporary cultural management. The journey does not seek to fragment cultural management into isolated areas, but rather to reveal the relationships connecting them: inequality affects participation; participation transforms programming; programming distributes visibility; funding conditions opportunities; organizations reproduce or challenge social structures; technology opens possibilities while also generating new barriers; and evaluation enables us to understand whether decisions actually produce the change they were intended to achieve.

At the heart of this entire journey lies an idea that runs throughout the work: culture is not something that some people produce for others to consume. It is a human capability that we all possess in different forms and degrees and that can be developed throughout life. Creating, interpreting, learning, observing, remembering, imagining, conversing, transmitting, experiencing, and participating are manifestations of this capability. Cultivating culture means cultivating the human being. Denying cultural opportunities therefore means limiting possibilities for personal and collective development.

The cultural management proposed by this book begins from this premise: a conception of culture as a right, as a capability, as a bond, as heritage, as an economic activity, and as a space for constructing the future. Truly inclusive culture is not built by incorporating a few exceptions into a system that remains intact, but by transforming the system itself so that human diversity becomes its starting point. Truly responsible cultural management does not merely administer what already exists: it identifies what is missing, challenges what excludes, creates opportunities, distributes capabilities, and opens pathways for more people to participate in constructing who we are and who we may become.

Because a society that cultivates culture also cultivates its capacity to imagine, understand, coexist, and transform itself. And therein lies, perhaps, one of the greatest responsibilities and one of the greatest opportunities of cultural

management: to turn culture into a space where no one is regarded as an outsider, where diversity is not an obstacle but a source of richness, where economic value is accompanied by human value, and where every person can find not merely something to look at, listen to, or consume, but also something to learn, create, share, and help grow. Culture belongs to everyone because it is part of everyone. Managing it with justice, intelligence, sensitivity, and a vision of the future ultimately means contributing to the construction of a more human society.

Chapter 1: Cultural Inequality: An Invisible Dimension of Social Inequality

Social inequality is usually analyzed through relatively visible dimensions: income, wealth, employment, education, housing, health, or access to certain public services. These dimensions make it possible to identify differences between individuals and groups and have constituted a central part of social research and public policymaking for decades. However, there is another dimension of inequality that, although it cuts across many of the aforementioned dimensions, has historically received comparatively less attention: cultural inequality. This is not limited to the ability to purchase a museum ticket, attend a concert, or buy a book. It also encompasses the conditions that enable people to develop cultural capabilities, recognize particular expressions as their own or as accessible to them, participate in cultural life, create and produce culture, transmit knowledge, access heritage, participate in cultural decision-making, and obtain social and institutional recognition for their own practices and productions.

Speaking of cultural inequality therefore means shifting our focus from the mere existence of a cultural offering toward the social conditions that determine who can benefit from it, who feels entitled to participate, who possesses the knowledge necessary to interpret particular cultural codes, who can develop a trajectory as a creator or cultural professional, and who has the capacity to influence what a society considers culturally valuable. This perspective is particularly relevant in societies such as Sweden, which have developed a cultural policy explicitly oriented toward universality. Swedish national objectives establish that everyone should have opportunities to participate in cultural life and that cultural policy should promote opportunities to experience culture, acquire education, and develop creative abilities. However, studies by the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis show that actual opportunities for participation remain associated with demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic variables.

The existence of a universalist cultural policy does not automatically eliminate inequalities. A policy may formally offer the same service to the entire population while producing unequal outcomes if people begin from different conditions. The free admission to a cultural institution, for example, may eliminate a direct economic barrier but not necessarily resolve problems related to geographic distance, opening hours, transportation, physical or cognitive accessibility, availability of time, familiarity with particular cultural codes, or the perception that a space is not intended for people like oneself. Thus, formal equality of access does not necessarily amount to substantive equality of participation.

This distinction constitutes the starting point of this chapter. Cultural inequality should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon produced by the interaction of economic resources, education, territory, gender, age, disability, social background, family circumstances, cultural infrastructure, public policies, forms of representation, and mechanisms of recognition. The objective is not to claim that every difference in cultural tastes or practices constitutes an injustice. Democratic societies legitimately contain an enormous diversity of preferences, identities, and forms of expression. The problem arises when particular differences in participation, creation, or recognition are systematically linked to structural inequalities and when people lack reasonably equivalent opportunities to develop their cultural capabilities.

1.1. Concept of Cultural Inequality

Cultural inequality can be defined, in general terms, as the differential distribution of opportunities, resources, capabilities, recognition, and possibilities for participation in cultural life among individuals and social groups. This definition requires a fundamental clarification: cultural inequality does not simply mean that people consume different cultural products. Diversity of preferences is a normal characteristic of any pluralistic society. Inequality emerges when social conditions systematically determine who can access particular cultural goods and experiences, who can develop the capabilities to participate in them, who can create and produce culture, and who can have their expressions recognized and legitimized.

From this perspective, culture can simultaneously be viewed as a right, a field of social participation, a set of symbolic resources, and a space in which power and opportunities are also distributed. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has interpreted the right to participate in cultural life as a right that includes, among other dimensions, participation, access, and contribution to cultural life. This means that the individual should not be conceived solely as a recipient of an offering produced by institutions, but also as a subject capable of developing, expressing, sharing, and transforming cultural practices.

This conception is particularly important for avoiding a reduction of cultural inequality to so-called cultural consumption. Visiting a museum, attending the theater, or reading books are useful indicators, but they do not exhaust the phenomenon. A person may not attend conventional cultural institutions and nevertheless maintain an intense cultural life through community-based, musical, digital, religious, family, linguistic, craft-based, or heritage-related practices. Consequently, measuring cultural inequality solely through attendance at traditional institutions may reproduce an implicit hierarchy between cultural forms considered legitimate and others that remain statistically invisible.

UNESCO precisely recognizes that cultural diversity is manifested through multiple forms of artistic and cultural creation, production, dissemination, distribution, and enjoyment, regardless of the means and technologies used. ([UNESCO][2]) This has methodological and policy implications. If public institutions seek to reduce cultural inequalities, they need to know not only who attends their spaces, but also who remains outside them, what practices they develop outside those spaces, what barriers they experience, and what mechanisms could facilitate their participation without necessarily requiring them to abandon their own cultural references.

In the Swedish context, this issue is directly related to the national objective of cultural participation. Kulturanalys has developed a broad conception of the participation objective encompassing four dimensions: the possibility of accessing a diverse and high-quality cultural offering; the possibility of developing creative abilities; the possibility of working professionally as a cultural creator; and the possibility of influencing the shaping of cultural life and cultural policy. ([Kulturanalys][3]) This formulation makes it possible to understand that cultural inequality has at least four interrelated dimensions: access, creation, professionalization, and influence.

Therefore, an operational definition of cultural inequality must consider both available resources and effective opportunities to transform those resources into meaningful participation. A library may exist in a locality and be formally accessible to everyone, but its existence does not guarantee that everyone can benefit from it to the same extent. Similarly, a cultural program may be open to the entire population and continue to attract primarily people with particular educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. The central question therefore shifts from "Does the offering exist?" to "Who can use it, under what conditions, and with what possibilities for appropriation and participation?"

Cultural inequality is also cumulative. Childhood spent in a household with abundant books, access to artistic activities, conversations about cultural works, and opportunities to visit cultural institutions may provide dispositions and knowledge that subsequently facilitate new educational and cultural experiences. Conversely, childhood characterized by economic constraints, limited geographic access, lack of family time, or an absence of infrastructure may reduce opportunities for cultural exposure, although none of these factors mechanically determines an individual's future.

This consideration precludes a deterministic explanation. Cultural trajectories are open and can be transformed through education, social mobility, public policies, interpersonal relationships, community experiences, and encounters with new cultural forms. However, recognizing that trajectories can change does not mean ignoring the fact that they begin from different positions. Precisely here lies the importance of studying cultural inequality: it makes it possible to identify

differences in conditions that a superficial reading of individual preferences might mistakenly interpret as simple personal choices.

In summary, cultural inequality should not be understood as a lack of cultural homogeneity. A democratic society does not require everyone to participate in the same activities. What it requires is that differences in participation, creation, and recognition not result from avoidable structural barriers and that everyone have reasonable opportunities to develop their cultural life.

1.2. Economic Inequality and Cultural Inequality

The relationship between economic inequality and cultural inequality is close, although it cannot be reduced to a mechanical cause-and-effect relationship. Income conditions the ability to purchase cultural goods and services, travel to cultural institutions, pay for artistic education, have access to digital devices, or devote time to activities that do not generate income. However, economic influence also operates indirectly through the family, educational, and territorial conditions associated with particular socioeconomic positions.

A person with a low income may experience difficulties covering the direct cost of a cultural activity, but the problem may extend to other less visible costs. Transportation, food away from home, travel time, childcare, the need to work during the hours when cultural activities take place, or employment insecurity may constitute barriers as significant as the ticket price. Cultural policy limited to reducing prices may therefore address only part of the problem.

Swedish data demonstrate precisely that differences in cultural practices do not disappear with the existence of extensive cultural infrastructure. In 2023, the majority of the population participated in numerous cultural activities, but Kulturanalys continued to identify differences associated with education, gender, place of residence, and, for various activities, household income. People with higher levels of education and those living in metropolitan areas appeared more frequently among those participating in different cultural activities. ([Kulturanalys][4])

Territory constitutes a particularly relevant dimension. Large cities concentrate museums, theaters, concert halls, galleries, festivals, universities, arts schools, specialized libraries, and cultural organizations. In rural areas or small communities, the cultural offering may depend on a small number of institutions. Kulturanalys has noted that cultural infrastructure is particularly vulnerable in small municipalities and rural areas when it depends on a limited number of actors, such as public libraries or educational associations. ([Kulturanalys][1])

Economic inequality is also related to the capacity to choose. When a family has sufficient resources, it can choose among multiple activities, combine formal and

informal education, and provide children with varied cultural experiences. A family with limited resources may be forced to select activities with lower direct and indirect costs. The difference lies not simply in "consuming more" or "consuming less," but in having a different range of choices.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to interpret culture exclusively as a consequence of wealth. Sociological research has shown that education, family background, and cultural dispositions interact with income. The Swedish experience itself demonstrates that differences in participation are associated with a set of socioeconomic, demographic, and geographic variables. ([Kulturanalys][1])

Therefore, policies aimed at reducing cultural inequality need to operate at several levels. Price reductions may be necessary, but they must be complemented by territorial infrastructure, transportation, accessibility, arts education, cultural mediation, community programs, and participation strategies. The question is not merely how much it costs to access culture, but what set of conditions a person needs in order to transform an available cultural offering into an experience that is genuinely possible and meaningful.

1.3. Cultural Rights

Viewing culture as a right substantially changes the way cultural inequality is addressed. If culture is understood solely as a leisure sector or market activity, differences in participation may be interpreted primarily as differences in preferences or purchasing power. When the rights dimension is recognized, the question changes: what conditions must be guaranteed so that people can participate in cultural life without discrimination and freely develop their cultural capabilities?

Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes everyone's right to take part in cultural life and establishes state obligations concerning the conservation, development, and dissemination of science and culture. It also recognizes the freedom indispensable for creative activity. ([Covenants de Derechos Humanos][5]) General Comment No. 21 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights develops this conception and distinguishes three closely related components: participation, access, and contribution to cultural life.

This perspective has a decisive consequence: cultural policy cannot be limited to producing an offering. It must create conditions for the effective exercise of rights. Cultural rights imply that people can choose their cultural practices, express themselves, develop creative capabilities, participate individually and collectively, and contribute to cultural life. They also imply that policies respect diversity and avoid imposing a single conception of what should be considered legitimate culture.

In Sweden, the rights dimension is integrated with the participation objective of cultural policy. Kulturanalys notes that the national objective that everyone should have the opportunity to participate is connected to other normative frameworks, including the rights of children, persons with disabilities, national minorities, and anti-discrimination legislation.

Cultural rights also have a freedom dimension. Ensuring cultural participation does not mean requiring people to consume particular cultural expressions. The state should not replace citizens' preferences with its own institutional preferences. The public function is to create conditions for plurality, accessibility, freedom of creation, and genuine opportunities for participation.

This introduces an important tension. Policies intended to "democratize" culture can reproduce inequalities if they are based on the assumption that certain audiences need to be educated to appreciate particular cultural forms. Kulturanalys shows that Swedish cultural policy has a history in which cultural democratization was initially linked to the idea of making a particular conception of culture accessible, whereas creation, participation, and people's influence over cultural life subsequently acquired greater importance.

The rights-based perspective makes it possible to partially overcome this tension because it shifts the focus from imposing a cultural hierarchy toward expanding capabilities and possibilities. The question is no longer how to persuade particular people to consume what institutions consider culturally valuable, but how to ensure that they can access, create, participate, and make decisions within a diverse cultural ecosystem.

1.4. Inequality in Access to Culture

Access is probably the most visible dimension of cultural inequality. Traditionally, it has been measured through indicators such as attendance at museums, libraries, theaters, cinemas, concerts, historic monuments, or exhibitions. These indicators remain important, but they must be interpreted within a broader framework.

Cultural access has physical, economic, temporal, informational, technological, linguistic, cognitive, and symbolic dimensions. An institution located several kilometers from a municipality without adequate transportation presents a physical barrier. An activity whose price exceeds a family's financial means presents an economic barrier. A program offered exclusively during working hours can create a temporal barrier. An inaccessible website can generate a technological barrier. A space whose institutional language presupposes specialized knowledge can produce a symbolic barrier.

Consequently, cultural accessibility cannot be reduced to the installation of ramps or elevators, although physical accessibility is indispensable. A genuinely inclusive policy must also consider sensory, cognitive, communicative, digital, and economic accessibility. This is particularly important for persons with disabilities, older adults, migrants, linguistic minorities, children, and people with different forms of sensory processing.

The territorial dimension is equally important. The concentration of cultural infrastructure in large cities creates structural differences between territories. Cultural decentralization policies, traveling activities, libraries, local cultural centers, and digital technologies can reduce some of these differences, but they do not necessarily eliminate them. Kulturanalys notes that people in large urban areas participate more extensively in cultural activities than those living in rural areas or small communities, a pattern that also appears in other Nordic countries. ([Kulturanalys][1])

Digitalization has introduced new possibilities and new inequalities. A person can access concerts, exhibitions, digital libraries, archives, and audiovisual content from home that previously required travel. However, digital access depends on connectivity, devices, digital skills, financial resources, and the ability to select and use information. Digitalization can therefore expand the cultural offering while simultaneously generating new forms of exclusion.

Comparative OECD research warns that cultural opportunities are not distributed evenly and that factors such as income, education, and background can influence participation. It also notes that participation patterns can reveal mechanisms of social exclusion and marginalization. ([OECD][6])

Access must therefore be understood as a chain of conditions. The existence of an institution is only the first link. There must then be material opportunities for transportation, financial capacity, sufficient information, accessibility, symbolic recognition, and conditions that allow the experience to have meaning for the individual. This conception requires cultural managers to abandon the idea that an institution is automatically inclusive simply because its doors are open.

1.5. Inequality in Cultural Participation

Participating in culture means more than attending an activity. Participation can be receptive, creative, community-based, professional, educational, or political. A person participates when experiencing a work, creating music, writing, preserving a tradition, organizing a community cultural activity, making decisions about a project, or helping define an institution's priorities.

The Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis proposes precisely a multidimensional conception of participation that includes receiving culture,

creating it, working professionally in the sector, and exercising influence over cultural life and cultural policies. ([Kulturanalys][3]) This definition is particularly useful because it prevents the success of cultural policy from being reduced to the number of tickets sold.

Swedish research shows that participation is related to gender, education, territory, and socioeconomic circumstances. In 2023, for example, women displayed higher levels of cultural activity across many practices, while people with higher education appeared more frequently among those participating in different activities. ([Kulturanalys][4])

However, these associations must be interpreted carefully. The fact that a person participates less does not necessarily mean that they have less interest in culture. It may mean that the activities available do not correspond to their interests, that economic or territorial barriers exist, that they lack time, that they do not feel represented, that they do not have sufficient information, or that the institution has not developed appropriate mechanisms for engaging with that audience.

This issue is fundamental to cultural management. If an institution observes that a particular group does not participate and immediately concludes that it "has no interest," it risks transforming an institutional problem into a supposed characteristic of the audience. Audience research should serve precisely to distinguish between an absence of demand, an absence of relevant supply, and the existence of barriers.

The Swedish experience offers an important lesson. Decades of policies aimed at expanding participation have achieved progress, but Kulturanalys concludes that existing measures have not been sufficient to eliminate disparities. ([Kulturanalys][1]) This conclusion should not be interpreted as a failure of cultural policy, but as evidence that cultural inequalities have multiple causes and require equally complex interventions.

In particular, childhood and youth acquire strategic importance. Swedish studies show associations between children's cultural habits and their parents' educational level. Kulturanalys has identified the participation of children and young people as a priority area because early differences can contribute to maintaining disparities at later stages of life.

This does not mean that childhood mechanically determines a person's cultural future. It means that early experiences can expand or constrain the range of opportunities available later. Schools, libraries, music and art schools, cultural centers, and community programs can play a compensatory role by providing experiences that not all households are able to offer.

Cultural participation can also be collective. In community contexts, people are not merely audiences but co-producers. This approach makes it possible to recognize local knowledge, community memory, minority practices, and forms of expression that may remain outside traditional institutions. Participation, consequently, should not be measured solely through attendance, but also through the capacity to intervene, belong, express oneself, and participate in decision-making.

1.6. Inequality in Cultural Production

A frequently less visible dimension is inequality in cultural production. It is not enough to ask who consumes culture; it is also necessary to ask who can become a creator, professional, artist, researcher, curator, manager, producer, or cultural worker.

Cultural production requires material resources, training, time, professional networks, workspaces, equipment, opportunities for exposure, and access to circuits of legitimation. Consequently, inequalities present throughout society can be reproduced within the cultural sector.

Kulturanalys research on professional participation in the Swedish cultural sector specifically addresses the relationship between cultural education and the composition of the sector's workforce through administrative and registry data. ([Kulturanalys][3]) This issue is fundamental because a policy that expands public access but does not diversify opportunities to become a creator or professional may improve consumption without sufficiently altering the structure of cultural production.

Productive inequality can emerge as early as the training stage. Artistic and cultural careers frequently require years of preparation, instruments, materials, mobility, unpaid or poorly paid internships, and social networks. People from more affluent households may be better positioned to bear these costs and wait for extended periods before achieving professional stability.

The problem subsequently extends to the cultural labor market. Unstable incomes, project-based work, dependence on grants, and the concentration of opportunities in particular cities may make certain professional trajectories more accessible to those with family networks and external financial resources.

Inequality in production also has a symbolic dimension. Cultural institutions function as spaces of selection and legitimation. They decide which artists receive programming opportunities, which exhibitions are considered relevant, which heritage is preserved, which narratives are incorporated into museums, and which communities are represented. Cultural power therefore consists not only in

producing works, but also in participating in the mechanisms that determine which productions receive visibility.

The UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions emphasizes the importance of creating conditions under which cultures can interact freely and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions. ([UNESCO][2]) From this perspective, productive diversity constitutes a dimension of cultural diversity.

Cultural inequality, therefore, does not end at the museum door. It is also present behind it: in who receives funding, who occupies decision-making positions, who can obtain an artist residency, who succeeds in publishing, who enters institutional circuits, and who remains outside them.

1.7. Cultural Capital and Inequality of Opportunity

The concept of cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu constitutes one of the most influential theoretical tools for understanding how social inequalities can be reproduced through cultural mechanisms. Bourdieu distinguished between embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. The first refers to dispositions, knowledge, and competencies incorporated through prolonged processes of socialization; the second includes cultural goods; and the third relates to institutionally recognized credentials and qualifications. ([Revistas UDEA][7])

The importance of the concept lies in its ability to explain why two people with formally equivalent access to an institution may have different experiences. Previous familiarity with particular cultural codes can facilitate the interpretation of a work, confidence in participating in a conversation, the ability to formulate questions, or the perception of belonging within a particular space.

Embodied cultural capital develops especially through socialization. The family constitutes one of the principal settings of transmission, although it is not the only one. Schools, peer groups, libraries, cultural institutions, and communities can also generate experiences that contribute to its development.

Empirical research has found evidence consistent with mechanisms of cultural reproduction. Studies of adolescents, for example, have identified relationships between family cultural capital and particular patterns of participation in the arts and heritage. ([ScienceDirect][8]) Research conducted in Colombia has also examined the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital and its relationship to participation in the performing arts, concerts, and cinema. ([Revistas UDEA][7])

However, the concept must be used cautiously. There is no deterministic relationship whereby a person from a family with greater cultural capital will necessarily develop a particular cultural life. Research following Bourdieu has

specifically examined the diversity of trajectories and the possibility that education, individualization, and social experiences may modify cultural practices. ([Redalyc][9])

The debate has also challenged the idea that cultural practices traditionally associated with dominant classes are the only relevant forms of cultural capital. Contemporary societies display much more heterogeneous cultural repertoires and forms of participation that extend across traditional institutions as well as popular and digital spaces.

Despite these limitations, the concept remains useful because it compels us to ask a question that attendance statistics cannot answer: what knowledge and dispositions does a person need in order to transform a cultural offering into an effective opportunity?

The answer has direct implications for cultural education. If cultural capital develops through exposure and experience, educational institutions can play a democratizing role. Schools do not have to turn all students into consumers of institutional culture, but they can broaden their repertoires, provide diverse experiences, and enable them to become familiar with different forms of expression.

In this way, culture can function both as a mechanism of reproduction and as a potential mechanism for expanding opportunities. This ambivalence is central. A cultural institution can reproduce inequalities if its codes are easily accessible only to those who possess particular prior experiences, but it can help reduce them if it develops mediation, education, participation, and recognition of different cultural repertoires.

1.8. Culture and Social Well-Being

The relationship between culture and social well-being has acquired growing importance in international research. Culture should not be considered solely in terms of its economic or institutional value. Cultural experiences can be associated with subjective well-being, health, learning, belonging, social relationships, and civic participation.

The World Health Organization conducted an extensive review of evidence concerning the relationship between the arts, health, and well-being, identifying more than 3,000 studies and finding evidence of a significant role for the arts in health promotion, the prevention of health problems, and the management of certain illnesses across the life course. ([Organización Mundial de la Salud][10])

This evidence does not mean that every cultural activity automatically produces health benefits or that culture can substitute for health interventions. The

relationship depends on the type of activity, context, population, and mechanisms involved. Nevertheless, there is sufficient research to consider cultural participation a potentially relevant dimension of well-being policies.

The OECD has also documented connections between cultural participation, social inclusion, education, innovation, well-being, health, and civic participation. At the same time, it warns that culture can reproduce social differences when access to certain cultural forms remains strongly associated with education, income, and other social factors. ([OECD][6])

This ambivalence is fundamental. Culture can contribute to well-being, but if its benefits are distributed unequally, it can also become another domain of inequality. Therefore, stating that culture improves well-being is not enough. The relevant policy question is who has access to the cultural opportunities capable of generating these benefits.

The collective dimension also deserves attention. Cultural practices can strengthen social ties, generate recognition, provide spaces for encounter, and contribute to the construction of identity. UNESCO has highlighted the potential of cultural practices, sites, and expressions to foster social inclusion, belonging, and cohesion. ([UNESCO][11])

The European Union has likewise developed a line of work linking culture, social cohesion, and well-being, emphasizing the relevance of cultural participation to health and well-being and highlighting the importance of paying particular attention to disadvantaged groups. ([Cultura y Creatividad][12])

From the perspective of cultural management, this implies an important transformation. Evaluating a library, museum, or cultural center exclusively through revenue, visitor numbers, or the number of activities may be insufficient. Dimensions such as belonging, learning, community participation, capability development, and well-being should also be considered, while avoiding the attribution of causal relationships that the specific evidence from a project cannot substantiate.

1.9. Audience Research as a Diagnostic Tool

If cultural inequality is multidimensional, cultural institutions need instruments capable of identifying it. Audience research constitutes a fundamental tool for this purpose, but only when it is used to understand the conditions of participation rather than merely to measure satisfaction.

Traditional audience research can answer questions such as who visits an institution, how frequently, how they learned about the activity, their age, or their

level of education. These variables are useful, but diagnosing cultural inequality requires going deeper into the reasons for participation and non-participation.

It is necessary to know who is absent, what barriers they encounter, what cultural forms they prefer, how they interpret the institution, what prior experiences they have, what accessibility needs they have, how they use the territory, what communication channels they employ, and what expectations they have of the organization.

Quantitative studies make it possible to identify patterns. Surveys can reveal differences in participation according to age, education, income, gender, territory, or frequency of activity. Administrative records can make it possible to analyze trajectories and territorial distribution. Eurostat, for example, includes participation indicators related to reading, cinema, theater, concerts, cultural sites, and certain artistic practices, as well as cultural activities carried out via the internet.

However, quantitative data need to be complemented by qualitative methods. Interviews, focus groups, observation, and participatory methodologies can reveal barriers that do not appear in a survey. A person may report that they do not visit a museum because of a "lack of interest," when a more in-depth interview reveals that they do not actually understand what they can do inside the museum, feel that the space does not represent their community, or do not feel comfortable there.

Audience research should also incorporate the dimension of non-audiences. An institution that investigates only those who already participate risks developing policies based on people who have already overcome the barriers. To study inequality, it is essential to investigate those who are absent as well.

In Sweden, the experience of Kulturanalys demonstrates the value of combining different sources. Its research on obstacles to expanding participation incorporated documents, surveys, registry data, qualitative interviews, and statistical analyses. ([Kulturanalys][3]) This combination makes it possible to overcome the limitations of relying on a single source.

Audience research should also move from a descriptive logic toward a diagnostic one. It is not enough to know that 20% of a particular group participates less. It is necessary to determine what mechanisms explain the difference and what intervention could modify it.

A sound cultural diagnosis should distinguish at least four situations. The first is an absence of supply: the territory or institution does not provide relevant activities. The second is the existence of barriers: an offering exists, but certain people cannot use it. The third is a lack of cultural fit: an offering and accessibility exist, but the content does not reflect the group's interests or identities. The fourth is a legitimately differentiated preference: people know about the offering, can

access it, and simply prefer other practices. These situations require different responses.

This distinction prevents one of the most common errors in cultural management: interpreting every absence of participation as a marketing problem. Some inequalities cannot be solved by communicating an activity more effectively; they require transforming prices, schedules, location, content, institutional relationships, or participation mechanisms.

1.10. Indicators for Measuring Cultural Inequality

Measuring cultural inequality constitutes one of the most important methodological challenges facing cultural policy. The difficulty begins with the very definition of the phenomenon. If only attendance at traditional institutions is measured, the resulting information concerns one specific dimension of participation, but not the entirety of cultural life.

Indicators should therefore be organized into different dimensions. A first dimension concerns access. It may include distance to facilities, availability of transportation, prices, opening hours, physical accessibility, digital availability, and territorial coverage. A second dimension concerns effective participation: frequency of attendance, reading, creative activities, community participation, and use of cultural resources. A third concerns production: the number and profile of creators, access to funding, professional opportunities, employment stability, and the territorial distribution of cultural activity. A fourth concerns influence: representation in decision-making bodies, citizen participation, and the capacity of different groups to participate in defining cultural policies.

Socioeconomic indicators should be cross-referenced with these variables. Education, income, employment, territory, age, gender, and other relevant characteristics make it possible to identify patterns of inequality. However, data must be handled carefully to avoid turning social categories into deterministic explanations.

The territorial dimension deserves particular attention. It is not enough to count the number of cultural institutions in a country. Their distribution, density, accessibility, and capacity to serve different populations must also be analyzed. Two municipalities may both have a library but experience completely different levels of access because of population size, opening hours, transportation, budget, and available activities.

Participation indicators should also distinguish intensity and diversity. One person may participate in an activity once a year, while another participates weekly in several activities. Both will appear as participants if the indicator uses a binary measure, but their cultural experiences are different. Similarly, two people may

have the same frequency of participation while having very different cultural repertoires.

The digital dimension requires its own indicators. European statistics already include cultural activities carried out via the internet, making it possible to recognize that contemporary cultural life is not limited to physical spaces. ([European Commission][13]) However, simply measuring whether a person uses the internet for cultural activities does not reveal the quality of that access, digital skills, the diversity of content consumed, or opportunities for creation.

Measurement should also incorporate reported barriers. Eurostat includes, in certain statistics, questions about reasons for not engaging in particular cultural activities. ([European Commission][14]) This type of information is particularly valuable because it makes it possible to move from measuring outcomes alone to identifying mechanisms.

A system of cultural inequality indicators could be structured around ten dimensions:

- 1. Economic accessibility:** prices, indirect costs, ability to pay, and availability of free admission or subsidies.
- 2. Territorial accessibility:** distance, transportation, distribution of facilities, and differences between urban and rural areas.
- 3. Physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility:** access conditions for persons with disabilities and functional diversity.
- 4. Cultural participation:** attendance, reading, creation, community-based practices, and digital cultural activities.
- 5. Diversity of participation:** variety of cultural practices and repertoires.
- 6. Cultural production:** opportunities to create, pursue professional careers, and access resources.
- 7. Cultural and educational capital:** cultural exposure, education, and competencies that facilitate participation.
- 8. Representation and recognition:** presence of different groups in programming, collections, narratives, and decision-making spaces.
- 9. Influence and governance:** effective participation by citizens and communities in defining policies and programs.
- 10. Social and well-being outcomes:** belonging, learning, cohesion, subjective well-being, and other outcomes that can be measured through appropriate methodologies.

These indicators should not be used to construct a single index intended to summarize all cultural inequality in one figure. Excessive reduction can conceal important differences. It is preferable to construct multidimensional systems that make it possible to observe where gaps exist and how they relate to one another.

Measurement should also incorporate longitudinal analyses. A snapshot of a single year makes it possible to understand a situation, but it does not necessarily make it possible to determine whether a policy has reduced inequalities. Comparable data over time are therefore necessary. In Sweden, the availability of cultural-habit time series provides an advantage for studying trends. Kulturanalys has documented both the stability of certain practices and persistent differences between groups. ([Kulturanalys][4])

The quality of indicators ultimately depends on the quality of the data. If certain groups are not adequately represented in records, inequality may remain invisible. In the broader context of well-being measurement, the OECD has emphasized the importance of improving the availability of data capable of revealing the convergence of multiple forms of social disadvantage. ([OECD][15]) The same principle applies to culture.

Chapter 2: Cultural Poverty and the Deprivation of Opportunities

Poverty is commonly associated immediately with insufficient income and with the inability to meet needs considered essential. This association is understandable because economic resources constitute a decisive dimension of living conditions. However, an exclusively monetary understanding of poverty is insufficient when the aim is to explain why certain individuals and groups face greater difficulties in fully developing their capabilities, participating in society, and building life projects. A person may be above a given monetary threshold while simultaneously experiencing significant constraints on their opportunities to access knowledge, participate in cultural activities, develop creative capabilities, establish social relationships, or benefit from experiences that broaden their horizons. Similarly, two people with similar incomes may have radically different cultural opportunities because of their education, geographical location, available time, social networks, family circumstances, or the accessibility of existing resources.

The notion of cultural poverty arises precisely from the need to broaden this perspective. It is not a matter of establishing a new rigid classification of poor people or of turning culture into a list of goods whose possession would determine who is culturally “well-off” or “poor.” Rather, it is about identifying situations in which individuals experience significant and persistent constraints on their access to knowledge, experiences, practices, spaces, and cultural opportunities that contribute to the development of their capabilities and to their full participation in society. The central question is therefore not whether a person consumes enough culture according to an institutional standard, but whether they have effective opportunities to develop a free, meaningful, and plural cultural life.

This perspective is particularly relevant in a democratic society because culture is not merely a sphere of entertainment. International human rights frameworks recognize the right of every person to participate in cultural life. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has indicated that this right encompasses three interrelated components: participation, access, and contribution to cultural life. Access includes, among other aspects, the possibility of knowing and understanding one’s own culture and that of others through education and information, while participation includes the possibility of developing cultural knowledge and expressions and taking part in creative activities. UNESCO likewise adopts a broad conception: cultural rights encompass access to, creation of, participation in, and enjoyment of culture, extending from heritage to the cultural and creative sectors and the digital environment.

In Sweden, this perspective corresponds directly to the national cultural policy objectives. The objective establishes that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in cultural life and that policy should promote opportunities to experience culture, acquire education, and develop creative abilities. Particular attention is also paid to the right of children and young people to culture. The existence of this objective, however, does not mean that cultural equality has been achieved. Studies by Kulturanalys show that cultural participation continues to present differences associated with socioeconomic, educational, and geographical variables.

Accordingly, this chapter approaches cultural poverty as a problem of opportunities and capabilities. The analysis begins with economic poverty but does not stop there; it examines cultural deprivation, access to knowledge and information, cultural experiences, the distribution of time and resources, the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital, capability development, and the democratization of audiences. Finally, it proposes understanding cultural life through five verbs that make it possible to observe it comprehensively: access, participate, create, learn, and benefit. These verbs do not describe necessarily successive stages, but rather dimensions that reinforce one another and that, when systematically constrained, can constitute a specific form of social deprivation.

2.1. The Concept of Cultural Poverty

The concept of cultural poverty does not have a single, universally accepted definition comparable to monetary measures of poverty. This qualification is essential for maintaining conceptual rigor. The available evidence allows us to speak of deprivation of cultural opportunities, inequality in participation, cultural exclusion, and constraints on capability development, but there is no international consensus that would make it possible to reduce all these phenomena to a single quantitative threshold of “cultural poverty.” It is therefore more appropriate to use the concept as an analytical tool for studying multidimensional situations of deprivation.

A first approach consists of understanding cultural poverty as a situation in which a person or group has insufficient opportunities to access, participate in, create, and develop cultural capabilities under conditions that allow for a meaningful cultural life. Insufficiency should not be confused with individual preference. A person may listen exclusively to a particular genre of music, never visit museums, or choose not to participate in cultural institutions without therefore being in a situation of cultural poverty. Diversity of preferences is a legitimate dimension of cultural freedom. Deprivation arises when options are constrained by circumstances that significantly reduce effective freedom to choose, explore, learn, create, or participate.

This distinction between preference and deprivation is essential. If a person has information, resources, time, transportation, accessibility, and genuine opportunities for participation and chooses not to use them, that decision should be respected. By contrast, if a person does not participate because they cannot afford transportation, live in an area without cultural provision, cannot access activities because of their needs, are prevented from doing so by their working hours, or have never had opportunities to encounter certain cultural practices, the situation is different. In the first case, there is a choice; in the second, there may be constraints on opportunity.

General Comment No. 21 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides a particularly useful framework for this distinction. In explaining the right to participate in cultural life, it does not limit itself to physical access to cultural goods but incorporates the possibility of acting freely, developing cultural knowledge and expressions, participating in creative activities, and accessing education and information. Cultural poverty can therefore be analyzed as a reduction in these possibilities.

The idea must also be detached from an elitist conception of culture. If cultural poverty were defined through the consumption of opera, theater, museums, or canonical literature, a particular cultural hierarchy would be turned into a measure of well-being. Such an approach would be problematic both scientifically and politically. Culture encompasses institutional and non-institutional forms, community practices, popular culture, linguistic expressions, living heritage, digital production, music, reading, audiovisual creation, crafts, and multiple forms of symbolic interaction.

Swedish data illustrate this diversity. In 2023, cultural activities undertaken at home were more common than many institution-based activities: listening to music, watching television series or films, and reading books showed high levels of participation. Kulturanalys recorded that 96% of the population had listened to music, 94% had watched television series, 92% had watched films, and 81% had read one or more books during the year. These figures demonstrate why it would be methodologically incorrect to equate low attendance at cultural institutions with an absence of cultural life.

Cultural poverty should therefore be conceived in terms of plurality. A person may develop an intense cultural life in family, community, or digital settings while simultaneously experiencing deprivation with respect to particular educational or institutional opportunities. Another person may frequently attend museums and theaters and nevertheless have few opportunities to create, express themselves, or influence cultural life. Deprivation may affect different dimensions.

From this perspective, cultural poverty has at least five components: availability of opportunities; effective accessibility; the capacity to use those opportunities; the

possibility of participation and creation; and the possibility of obtaining personal and social benefits from cultural life. These components are related but are not equivalent. Having a library nearby does not necessarily mean being able to use it; being able to use it does not necessarily mean finding relevant content; finding relevant content does not guarantee the ability to develop capabilities; and developing capabilities does not necessarily imply having opportunities to share them or turn them into professional trajectories.

The notion of cultural poverty is particularly relevant when applied to childhood. A child who grows up without regular access to books, libraries, artistic activities, heritage, cultural spaces, or creative experiences may have fewer opportunities to develop particular repertoires and capabilities. This does not mean that their future is predetermined. Human trajectories are malleable, and educational and cultural institutions can subsequently expand opportunities. However, the existence of early differences justifies preventive policies.

Recent data from Sweden show precisely that the cultural practices of children and adolescents are associated with demographic, socioeconomic, and geographical differences. The Kulturanalys report on children aged 12 to 18 identifies cinema as the most frequent cultural activity, followed by visits to libraries, concerts, and museums, and points to differences associated with social and territorial context.

For this reason, cultural poverty should not be understood as a label applied to individuals, but as a condition of opportunities that can vary throughout the life course. A person may experience deprivation during one stage and overcome it later. They may also have access to certain cultural dimensions while being excluded from others. The objective of cultural management should not be to classify people, but to identify barriers and expand opportunities.

2.2. Economic Poverty and the Poverty of Cultural Opportunities

The relationship between economic poverty and cultural opportunities is close, but not linear. Income provides the capacity to purchase goods and services, travel, obtain technological equipment, pay for training, and free up time for certain activities. When resources are scarce, families tend to prioritize immediate material needs such as housing, food, transportation, health, and compulsory education. Cultural activities may be relegated to a lower priority when they are perceived as discretionary expenses.

This situation does not imply that low-income families lack cultural interest. The problem may lie precisely in the gap between interest and possibility. A person may have a strong interest in theater and nevertheless be unable to afford the cost of a ticket, transportation, and childcare. Another may wish to learn to play an

instrument but lack the resources to purchase one or pay for lessons. A family may value reading but lack a nearby library or have difficulty purchasing books.

The distinction between interest and possibility is essential to avoid moralizing interpretations. When a cultural policy observes low participation rates among low-income households and concludes that there is little interest, it transforms an inequality of opportunities into an alleged difference in preferences. Swedish research provides evidence against such simplistic interpretations: there are socioeconomic and educational differences in cultural practices, but these form part of a broader set of demographic and geographical factors.

Indirect costs can be particularly important. The admission fee represents only one component of the cost of certain activities. Transportation, time, parking, food, childcare, and other expenses can turn an apparently affordable activity into one that is difficult to access. Institutions seeking to reduce inequality through free admission must therefore analyze the total cost of participation.

Time is an economic dimension because it is not distributed independently of social position. Those who have precarious employment, multiple jobs, long working hours, or intensive caregiving responsibilities may have less time available for cultural activities. A free cultural offering scheduled at times incompatible with the lives of certain groups does not necessarily constitute an equitable offering.

Geography intensifies this relationship. When cultural provision is concentrated in large cities, people in rural areas may need to invest more time and money to access it. Cultural infrastructure thus becomes a territorially unequal resource. Kulturanalys has identified geography as one of the factors associated with differences in cultural participation in Sweden and has highlighted the need to strengthen national infrastructure in order to broaden participation.

Digital inequality has a similar structure. Digital platforms can reduce geographical barriers, but they require connectivity, devices, digital skills, and the ability to find and use content. Digitalization does not automatically eliminate inequality; it can shift it toward new forms of access.

Economic poverty may also affect the continuity of experiences. Occasional access to a free activity is not the same as having sustained opportunities for cultural education. Artistic learning often requires continuity, practice, and support. A policy that offers a one-time experience may generate interest, but does not necessarily develop a capability.

For this reason, cultural democratization should distinguish between episodic access and sustained access. The former makes it possible to become acquainted with an activity; the latter can generate skills, confidence, and relationships. Reducing inequalities requires attention to both levels.

The relationship between income and culture should not, however, be interpreted as unidirectional. Cultural opportunities can contribute to educational, social, and personal development and, in certain contexts, expand capabilities that subsequently benefit other dimensions of life. The OECD links cultural participation to social inclusion, education, innovation, well-being, health, and civic participation, while also emphasizing that cultural opportunities are unequally distributed and depend, among other factors, on income and education.

This makes it possible to formulate a central idea: economic poverty can produce poverty of cultural opportunities, but poverty of cultural opportunities can, in turn, reinforce educational, social, and territorial disadvantages. This is not to claim an automatic causal relationship, but rather to recognize a relationship of cumulative disadvantage.

2.3. Cultural Deprivation

The concept of cultural deprivation makes it possible to shift the analysis from the quantity of culture consumed toward the opportunities that are effectively available. Deprivation occurs when an individual or community lacks sufficient conditions to exercise relevant dimensions of their cultural life and this lack is associated with social, economic, territorial, educational, institutional, or accessibility barriers.

Deprivation may be absolute with respect to a specific opportunity—for example, the absence of an accessible library in a given territory—or relative, when the opportunity exists but is distributed in significantly unequal ways. It may also be cumulative: a person may simultaneously experience economic, territorial, digital, and time-related barriers.

One of the principal difficulties is determining which opportunities should be regarded as relevant. There is no universal, closed list. From a rights-based perspective, however, fundamental areas can be identified: knowing and developing one's own culture, accessing other expressions, receiving cultural education and information, participating in cultural activities, expressing oneself, creating, contributing to cultural life, and enjoying its benefits. This formulation corresponds to the international interpretation of the right to participate in cultural life.

Deprivation may also be symbolic. A person may have physical access to a museum yet find no representation of their history, language, or community. They may enter a theater and find no content reflecting their experience. They may visit a library and have no access to materials in a language that enables them to fully develop their cultural life. In such cases, physical access exists, but the experience of belonging may be limited.

Representation matters because culture is not merely about receiving content. It also involves recognition. When certain communities are systematically absent from collections, exhibitions, programming, or decision-making spaces, the institution may implicitly convey that these communities occupy a secondary position within the cultural sphere.

This dimension is connected to cultural democratization. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning participation in cultural life defines access as the effective possibility of being informed, educated, becoming acquainted with, understanding, and enjoying cultural goods and values, and participation as the effective possibility of expressing oneself, communicating, acting, and creating freely. The word “effective” is particularly important: it is not enough to formally recognize a right if material conditions prevent its exercise.

Cultural deprivation may also arise in relation to knowledge. A person may live in an environment where vast amounts of digital information are available and nevertheless lack sufficient skills to distinguish reliable sources, understand specialized content, or participate actively in processes of knowledge production. The abundance of information does not automatically amount to equal access to knowledge.

Digital culture has multiplied this problem. The availability of content is extraordinarily broad, but the capacity to navigate among it is unequally distributed. Digital, linguistic, informational, and critical competencies influence what each person can find, understand, and produce.

Contemporary cultural deprivation should therefore be studied as a deprivation of capabilities for use, not merely of goods. Access to a computer does not guarantee digital equality; access to a library does not guarantee cultural equality; the existence of a museum does not guarantee equality of experience. In each case, it is necessary to analyze what the person can actually do with the resource available.

This perspective makes it possible to move beyond a static view of cultural poverty. The issue is not merely to count available goods, but to analyze what opportunities those goods generate and who can convert them into capabilities.

2.4. Access to Knowledge and Information

Knowledge constitutes one of the most important cultural resources because it enables people to understand the world, interpret cultural expressions, develop capabilities, and participate in society. Libraries, archives, schools, universities, museums, documentation centers, and digital platforms perform essential functions in this process.

Access to knowledge should not be confused with the mere availability of information. Contemporary societies contain an extraordinary quantity of content, but the ability to find, evaluate, understand, and use quality information is unequally distributed. A person may have access to thousands of webpages while lacking the tools necessary to identify reliable sources or contextualize information.

International law explicitly links cultural participation with education and information. General Comment No. 21 states that access includes the possibility of knowing and understanding one's own culture and that of others through education and information, as well as receiving quality education and training while respecting cultural identity.

Public libraries acquire particular importance in this context. They are not merely places where books are stored. They are knowledge infrastructures that can provide free access to information, reading, technology, educational activities, and community spaces. Their role is particularly important for people who cannot individually acquire certain resources.

Museums and archives also perform functions related to access to knowledge, although through different methodologies. Their collections, documents, and interpretive devices make it possible to construct relationships between people, memory, territory, and history. However, the accessibility of the knowledge produced by these institutions depends on how it is interpreted and communicated.

Language constitutes a fundamental barrier. Cultural information may be technically accurate and nevertheless inaccessible if it uses excessively specialized language. Democratizing knowledge does not require simplifying it to the point of losing rigor, but rather constructing different levels of mediation that enable diverse audiences to understand it.

Information and cultural literacy are particularly important in the digital environment. People need competencies to evaluate sources, understand copyright, recognize information manipulation, protect their privacy, and use digital tools to create and share content.

Access to knowledge also has a territorial dimension. Universities, major research libraries, museums, and specialized archives are often concentrated in particular urban centers. Digital technologies can reduce some aspects of this concentration, but they do not completely replace physical experience or guarantee equal access.

In this context, universal access to culture requires a combination of physical and digital infrastructure. Public policy should avoid presenting these dimensions as

mutually exclusive alternatives. A digital library may complement, but not necessarily replace, a local library. A virtual museum may expand the experience but cannot replace every dimension of an in-person visit.

Inequality in knowledge can have cumulative effects. Those who have early access to books, conversations, educational institutions, and informational resources may develop greater familiarity with particular codes. That familiarity facilitates new experiences and can subsequently expand educational and cultural opportunities. This mechanism connects directly with cultural capital and intergenerational transmission.

2.5. Access to Cultural Experiences

Culture is not transmitted solely through information. It is also learned through experiences. Visiting a museum, attending a performance, participating in a workshop, singing in a choir, playing an instrument, reading with others, participating in a community festival, or visiting a heritage site are experiences that can develop different capabilities.

Cultural experiences have a cumulative dimension. A first visit may be confusing; subsequent visits may increase familiarity and confidence. A first creative experience may be a one-time event; continuity can transform it into a capability. Cultural policies should therefore consider the frequency and continuity of opportunities.

Kulturanalys data show that the Swedish population has a high level of cultural activity, but also persistent differences between groups. In 2023, cultural activities undertaken at home were more common than many forms of institutional attendance, while visits to historic sites, cinemas, libraries, and museums showed substantial but differentiated levels.

This difference is methodologically significant. If a cultural policy considers only in-person institutions, it may underestimate the cultural intensity of certain groups. But if it measures only activities undertaken at home, it may overlook inequalities in access to collective, educational, and heritage-related experiences.

Cultural experience also has a social dimension. A visit may take place individually, but many cultural experiences are constructed through interaction with family members, friends, teachers, mediators, and other participants. Support can be decisive for those who have no family background of participation.

This is where one of the most important functions of cultural mediation emerges. Mediation should not be understood as the simplified translation of a work for an audience considered incapable of understanding it. Its broader function is to facilitate relationships between people, content, institutions, and contexts.