

The Situation of At-risk and Displaced
Artists and Culture Professionals

ON
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MOVE

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Case Studies

CHAPTER 11

Towards a Systemic Shift: Setting Standards for the Protection of Artists at Risk



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On the Move is the international information network dedicated to artistic and cultural mobility, gathering 86 members from 32 countries. Since 2002, On the Move provides regular, up-to-date and free information on mobility opportunities, conditions and funding, and advocates for the value of cross-border cultural mobility. Co-funded by the European Union and the French Ministry of Culture, On the Move is implementing an ambitious multi-annual programme to build the capacities of local, regional, national, European and international stakeholders for the sustainable development of our cultural ecosystems.

On the Move regularly commissions researchers to investigate different themes closely related to the network's activities and the work carried out by its members. Reflecting on transversal concerns and key areas of artistic and cultural mobility, the network tries to establish a clearer picture of the current movements and trends while formulating policy recommendations.

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CHAPTER 11

Towards a Systemic Shift: Setting Standards for the Protection of Artists at Risk

by Yamam Al-Zubaidi



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In 1980, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist¹, which has served as a global framework aimed at improving the conditions for artists for forty-five years. This recommendation addresses various issues, including the freedom of expression for artists, as well as their working conditions and social and economic rights.

The Recommendation calls upon Member States and other relevant stakeholders—such as non-governmental organisations and the private sector—to develop and implement policies, measures, and initiatives that address a wide range of topics. It is not limited to traditional concerns like employment, social security, and artistic expression, instead, it takes a holistic approach, covering areas such as training, mobility, and gender equality.

By setting standards for the protection of artistic communities, the Recommendation has significantly influenced the development of national frameworks designed to enhance the status of artists and improve their working conditions, among other aspects.

On the other hand, the fifth and most recent global consultation regarding the implementation of the Recommendation highlights a significant shift in the social reality. It notes that nationalism and authoritarianism appear to be on the rise, leading to conflicts and causing ‘global trauma.’² The consultation describes the situation of artists as ‘deeply alarming.’ Attempts to silence dissent and limit freedom of expression seem to be on the rise across the world and are becoming a permanent feature of the social reality, undermining the fundamental principles of international law, particularly international human rights law.

Artists, alongside journalists, are becoming prime targets for censorship, violence, and legal persecution. An increasing number of artists are either voluntarily or involuntarily displaced, fleeing censorship, persecution, and even threats to their lives. It is not unfair to say that artists at risk and displaced artists are among the first and direct casualties of this global trauma.

The international community has acknowledged the emerging challenges faced by journalists by adopting the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.³ The Plan, a result of a process that took roughly two years, was backed by resolutions from the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and UNESCO. In contrast, there is currently no comparable global framework to protect artists in emergencies, even as such emergencies appear to be becoming a persistent aspect of the current global landscape.

The absence of an international normative framework for the protection of artists in emergencies has been widely acknowledged. Recently, UNESCO has taken steps to learn from the UN plan that addresses the situations of journalists, specifically highlighting the differences between the challenges faced by journalists and those faced by artists.⁴ In this context, UNESCO has explicitly called for greater feedback on the conditions of artists at risk.⁵

1 UNESCO, [‘UNESCO and the Status of the Artist’](#).

2 UNESCO, [Empowering Creativity. Implementing the UNESCO 1980 Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist](#). UNESCO, 2023, p. 70.

3 UN, [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#), CI-12/CONF.202/6, 2012. More material is available to download from UNESCO, [‘UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity’](#).

4 Soraide, R., [Defending creative voices. Artists in emergencies - Learning from the safety of journalists](#), UNESCO, 2023.

5 Ibid., p.11.

Produced by civil society organisations active in this area, and contributing a bottom-up perspective, these volumes were not explicitly designed as a response to UNESCO's above-mentioned call for feedback. Nevertheless, they

do help to deepen the understanding of the unique circumstances surrounding artists in crisis situations in complementarity with the key factors identified by UNESCO.

Learning from practices

On the Move's research and action project on 'The Situation of At-Risk and Displaced Artists and Cultural Professionals', including the series of publications compiled in three volumes so far, attempts to outline the general patterns in existing support initiatives. To some extent, it also reveals recurring patterns in the approaches underpinning these initiatives.. However, it is important to review what we have learnt and consider whether we still need a normative framework for the protection of artists at risk. Or can a substantial shift be achieved by incremental improvements that address the identified shortcomings?

A review of relevant literature in this field, presented in the first volume of this research project⁶, has identified various challenges and shortcomings in the current approaches to the protection of artists in emergencies. The volume has also suggested a way to (re-)structure the debate on future initiatives to protect and support artists in emergencies. Instead of thinking in terms of recommendations for specific types of organisations involved, it is proposed that we think in terms of broader shifts in approaching the challenges. We are advised to address issues such as policy developments, structural and institutional shifts, and operational shifts, and focus on monitoring, documentation, and

knowledge production. The message from the literature review seems to be a call for a systemic shift.

The second volume⁷, focusing on the cultural policies in the European Union, has illustrated some of the shortcomings in the current support schemes for artists in emergencies, delivered across the Union. One such shortcoming is that initiatives are subject to the political priorities of political elites rather than the realities of artists in emergencies. Issues such as a lack of permanent and long-term approaches, the need to enhance the involvement of civil society, consulting the arts sector, and empowering grassroots actors are identified as essential factors for developing the relevant policies and initiatives. In this regard, the second volume echoes the reasoning in the literature review of the first volume mentioned above.

The common thread in both volumes can be understood as a call for a systemic shift in how initiatives to support and protect artists in emergencies are understood, perceived, planned, and delivered, both before and during their implementation.

This third volume⁸ provides a bottom-up perspective, addressing the challenges on the

6 Yazaji, R., *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals. Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition – Volume 1 Scoping Review*. On the Move, 2025.

7 Polivtseva, E. and Stambke, F., *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals. Policy and Practice in the EU: Pathways, Impediments and Patchwork Solutions – Volume 2 Cultural Policy Analysis*. On the Move, 2025.

8 *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals – Volume 3 Case Studies*. On the Move, 2025.

ground. For instance, while the number of calls related to artists at risk has been growing in On the Move's database of international open calls, access barriers remain, particularly with regards to visa support.⁹ Interviews with key organisations providing support for artists at risk in the USA reveal that political shifts and instability affect the modes of funding.¹⁰ A comparative analysis of two pivotal initiatives to support artists at risk in the USA and in Europe indicates that both initiatives struggle to ensure long-term funding despite having different approaches and priorities.¹¹ Another analysis of two European-based initiatives concludes that the future of supporting artists at risk is hybrid, due to its very nature, as it combines elements of practical and organisational elements with challenges related to safety, representation, and

autonomy of the artists supported.¹² The last point is emphasised in a self-critical reflection by an initiative based in Germany, pointing out that good intentions are not enough; there is a need for hosting organisations to adjust their usual work to handle the power imbalance in relation to the artists offered protection.¹³

The main takeaway from the third volume is not a criticism of the initiatives discussed; they are all making a valuable contribution to the situation of artists at-risk. Instead, the main conclusion is that at least some of the shortcomings identified can be understood as a reflection of the systemic preconditions in the field. Once again, what is needed is a systemic shift in the field; good intentions are not enough.

Formulating standards

Certainly, one aspiration behind the current volumes of research is to document experiences of various actors in the field—national, international, public, private, and non-profit actors equally. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the challenges of current approaches to protecting artists at risk and displaced artists are systemic, in the sense that the shape of existing support schemes, their design, and the outcome, largely—not marginally—depend on the underlying structures, processes, and relationships. Systemic challenges require a systemic response; consequently, the main lesson is that the lack of a normative binding framework

for this field remains the challenge and, in many ways, a such a framework could facilitate a substantial shift that could ensure adequate and relevant support schemes.

A standard-setting normative agreement at the international level is the most fruitful way forward, to ensure that artists at risk and displaced artists are supported in line with common standards, independently of the jurisdiction involved, the identity of the funders, the identity of the supporting organisations, and, last but not least, the identity of the artist.

9 Wilson, C. R., 'At-risk and Displaced Arts Workers: Analysing On the Move's Database of International Open Calls for Participation' in [*The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*](#). On the Move, 2025.

10 DeVlieg, M. A., 'Opening Our Minds: Including Incoming Artists in the Communities and Cultural Sector of the USA' in [*The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*](#). On the Move, 2025.

11 Kiulina, D., 'A Comparative Analysis of IIE Artist Protection Fund (United States of America) and PAUSE programme (France)' in [*The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*](#). On the Move, 2025.

12 Tamimi, F., 'A Comparative Analysis of State of the Art(ist) (Austria) and Rawabet (Europe) Programmes' in [*The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*](#). On the Move, 2025.

13 Stambke, F., 'Case Study: The Martin Roth Initiative's Funding in Germany Programme (Germany)' in [*The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*](#). On the Move, 2025.

Such an endeavour is not the task of one or two players in the field. Instead, what is urgently needed is an inclusive conversation on how such a standard-setting, normative agreement can and should be shaped. To put it simply, international actors, states, funders, and organisations in the field representing, among others, the arts

sector and the non-profit sector need to gather their respective knowledge and experience and develop a set of general standards that would become the guiding principles for all kinds of protection initiatives targeting artists at risk and displaced artists.

Creating the conditions

The need for standard-setting is underpinned by various factors. First, the rise of populist movements has given fuel to democratic backsliding, even in countries with, formally speaking, well-established liberal democracies, which has raised serious concerns about the long-held belief that freedom of artistic expression is safe under the frameworks of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Evidence suggests that significant threats to the safety of artists and their freedom of expression have transcended political borders and regimes. Although the form, intensity, and severity of these threats may vary across different regions in the world, they are not confined to specific countries, regions, or political arrangements. As a result, an increasing number of artists worldwide find themselves displaced, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, escaping (self-)censorship, persecution, and even violence in the worst-case scenarios. A global phenomenon can only be challenged with global standards.

Second, the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine, including the attacks on and killing of Palestinian artists and cultural workers, has deepened once more the crisis of international law, its efficiency, and efficacy. Under current circumstances, the legitimacy of a call for internationally agreed standards may therefore seem to be disconnected from the reality on the ground. Nevertheless, if we are to take the defense

of freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, and the protection of those engaged in artistic work seriously, abandoning international law is not the way forward. Instead, there is a need to not only return to and strengthen international law, but also that international law responds to the reality on the ground.

Third, this current volume of *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals* provides evidence that there is a critical mass of practices, experiences, and accumulated knowledge related to supporting artists under attack. Public, private, national, and international actors have been engaged in support schemes with a variety of approaches, geographies, and funding arrangements. Last but not least, the cultural sector and the non-profit sector have been engaged in the situation of artists under threat nationally and internationally, including engagement with the UN system.¹⁴ These initiatives would be further supported with a standard-setting normative agreement.

The sector needs a standard-setting normative framework with a programmatic approach to reshape the current landscape of available support schemes for artists at risk and displaced artists. It will certainly not solve all the challenges, but it will inform the development of a holistic approach where persecuted artists, regardless

14 Some examples are Artists at Risk (ARC)'s [Contribution to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review on Cuba](#) and [on Nicaragua](#).

of their personal circumstances, can be provided with protection shaped by the same set of general principles. Neither the identity of the persecuted artist nor the form, shape, or organisational structure under which support is provided should disproportionately impact the chances to survive as an artist.

It is high time to bring to the table international actors, states, the arts and cultural sector, and the non-profit sector to collectively elaborate on standards and principles that would potentially raise the funding, and, most importantly, create

synergies to improve the protection of artists and cultural workers under attack, independently of the circumstances of the artist or the support-providing organisations involved.

In this regard, the UNESCO Recommendation, the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and the work done on Sustainable Development Goals 2030, recognising the value of culture and arts as a common global good¹⁵, should serve as an inspiration to set standards for protecting those who ensure our common good continues to thrive.

To fully appreciate the breadth of the research on The Situation of At-Risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals, please do consider reading the [other chapters](#) gathered in this third report, as well as the first two reports available for download: [Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition – Volume 1 Scoping Review](#) and [Policy and Practice in the EU: Pathways, Impediments, and Patchwork Solutions – Volume 2 Cultural Policy Analysis](#).

¹⁵ See UNESCO, '[Culture as a Global Public Good: Member States Rally for Culture as a Stand-Alone Goal in Post-2030 Agenda](#)'.

About the author

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