

READ THE ROOM

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Transnationals:
Who are they and
what do they want?

A timely account
of the recent Arab
art communities
in Europe

Nadia Cherif

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Mophradat

Read the Room #2

Transnationals: Who are they and what do they want?
A timely account of the recent Arab art communities
in Europe

Written by Nadia Cherif

Artist interviews conducted by Aline Khoury,
Aly Talibab, Karim Kattan, Nadia Cherif, and Ruba Totah

Editing by Karim Kattan and Mai Abu ElDahab

Coordination by Reem Shilleh

Design by Siwar Kraitem

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Mophradat
Rue de l'Abattoir 4
1000 Brussels
Belgium

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“Read the Room” is the title of a series of booklets
published by Mophradat about questions that affect us
collectively as a community. “Us” is people everywhere
who call the Arab world home, are concerned with its
present and, through a wide variety of art practices,
aspire to take part in shaping its future.



Introduction

This research provides a comparative analysis of the challenges facing artists from the recent Arab art diaspora in Europe, and puts forward recommendations for possible programing and strategies that can best fit the needs of this community.

In a context of dramatically increased movement of Arab artists between the region and Europe over the past 10 years, Mophradat in its role as an arts organization whose purpose is to create opportunities for Arab artists recognized the urgency to develop a precise understanding of the demographic composition of its community, and what the conditions they are facing are. With one foot in Brussels and the other in Athens, Mophradat¹ works to bring together artists, curators, and art institutions who share progressive values and listen to and augment their distinctive voices and therefore this research appeared imperative to ensuring its programs are well informed and grounded.

In line with its commitment to both new generations of artists in the region and to those who have migrated over the past decade to Europe, Mophradat has considered it necessary and timely to conduct research/qualitative analysis of the available material and resources within the organization pertaining to its community of applicants and beneficiaries, in order to ensure that the questions the organization asks and the opportunities it creates are consistent with the lived conditions and desires of this sizeable community. The overall objective of the research was, at first, to define and defend an approach based on a better, more comprehensive understanding of what is happening within and outside the region.

This research was planned prior to the onset of the pandemic, but was later adapted and refined to ensure that changes artists faced due to this exceptional situation were taken into consideration. The aim of the research itself, however, was intentionally not focused on any one specific crisis or issue in aiming to identify broader characteristics and trends.²

The report is also intended as a tool for other organizations engaging with the same target group — artists from the Arab world or who identify with the Arab world — and can guide them in planning service-oriented projects adapted to these artists' needs.

Notwithstanding, the author is especially concerned with emphasizing that under no circumstances should this report be mistaken for a guide on how to instrumentalize this target

group — this study is meant to produce suitable project strategies adapted to the group's needs and realities, not tokenize them or assign them a reductive identity.

The research comes to the following conclusions that there is a need to:

Conceptually redefine the geographical understanding of the location of Arab artists

Recognize the prevalence of transnationality and advocating for inclusive and broader access to grants and other support

Consolidate, analyse and extrapolate from available data and resources gathered over the last decade of support

Create new forms of support

Footnotes

1 Mophradat implements programs and offers different types of support schemes to artists and art professionals. From 2015 to 2020, Mophradat put forward 25 support schemes, received 2,934 applications, and supported 482 individuals located in 81 different cities [most cited were Cairo (113), Beirut (87), Brussels (24), Berlin (19), Paris (19), Ramallah (19), London (14), New York (15), Amman (13), Damascus (10), and Alexandria (10)].

2 At the time of the interviews, most interviewees had not been significantly financially affected by the pandemic,

given that they had already secured running grants, fellowships, and production commitments until the end of the year. Artists based in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Oslo also had access to "working grants" and "emergency/pandemic grants" supported by their respective governments. However, although interviewees expressed relative financial stability in regards to this first year of the pandemic (2020), there is much uncertainty regarding the upcoming one, as economic depressions and larger budget cuts in the cultural sphere are expected to continue.



Methodology

Looking at applications An attentive analysis of the applicants and applications to Mophradat’s programs in order to assess the needs and situations of the pool of artists concerned. The research has looked into data related to applicants and beneficiaries of Mophradat support schemes and programs since 2015 and into the content of applications submitted to seven support schemes published between 2018 and 2020.³

Talking to artists It is also based on an analysis of information obtained through in-depth autobiographical interviews as follows: 1) Interviews conducted between March and May 2021 by Nadia Cherif with fourteen artists and art practitioners who have applied to or benefited from Mophradat’s programs and who are under the age of 30 and based within and outside the Arab world. 2) Interviews conducted between June and October 2020 by four researchers based on discipline, including visual arts, music, literature and performing arts, with thirty-six artists based and active in Europe who were deemed to belong to what Mophradat termed a “post-Arab Spring generation” of practitioners whose cultural horizons were at least partly shaped by the events of 2011.


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Recognizing tendencies The report offers both quantitative data and assessments thereof, as well as a qualitative description and analysis of the perspectives of the artistic community Mophradat is engaged with. Among what it offers is a comprehensive survey of strategic features and typical patterns of said communities, illustrated with examples and relevant data, and a series of proposals based on these findings for Mophradat’s overall strategy.

Footnotes

3 The seven support schemes are Grants for Artists 2018 (Round 1), Grants for Artists 2018 (Round 2), Grants for Artists 2019 (Round 1), Grants for Artists 2019

(Round 2), Grants for Artists 2020 (Round 1), Grants for Artists 2020 (Round 2), and Self Organizations 2020.



Findings

What are the characteristics of the target group?

A mosaic of profiles Of the applications, 51% were submitted by (cis and trans) men while 42% by (cis and trans) women, and seven percent of applicants explicitly stated that they “belong[ed] to a wider spectrum of gender identities” or preferred not to answer.

The larger segment of applicants are born between 1991 and 1995 — therefore aged between 26 and 30 — and represent 28% of applicants. Those born between 1990 and 1986 (aged 31 to 35) represent 26% of applicants and those born between 1981 and 1985 (aged 36 to 40) represent 21%.

28% are 26 to 30 years old

42% are women

Live in 54 different countries

62% experienced temporary or permanent migration

30% located outside the Arab world

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More than 54 different countries were identified as an applicant’s “current location.” The largest groups of applicants were located in Egypt (30%) and Lebanon (12%), with equal distribution among Palestine, Morocco, France, Germany, and the United States (5% of applicants from each location) thereafter. One third of applicants from the Arab world were located outside the Arab world at the time of application. 47% of applicants from the Arab world located outside the Arab world are women.

These numbers cannot lead us to conclude the existence of any one evident tendency or trend based on gender or age demographics in the quantitative data obtained. The content of received applications, however, has highlighted the prevalence of one clear characteristic among the studied community: mobility or transnationality.

A mobile/transnational community If a majority of applicants have indicated being located in their country of origin at the time of the application, a qualitative analysis of a pool of 58 of these “in-country” applications showed that more than 62% of them have experienced migration to locations outside the Arab world or present a transnational aspect in their life, making the mobility/transnational parameter much more prevalent than it first appeared.

Interviews also confirmed this prevalence and showed that applicants experience different types of migration: intermittent migration, longer-term migration, voluntary migration, more forced forms of migration, or regular transnational mobility. Also, migration does not only occur from the Arab world to Europe but also from Europe to the Arab world, within the Arab world itself, and back and forth between the Arab world and Europe.

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We can cite the cases of artists that have studied abroad, artists that live both within and across the borders of multiple countries, or highly educated second-generation migrants born and raised in Europe, who return to their parents’ country of origin but still keep a relationship with the country they were born in.

These examples show the variety of cross-borders mobility types and demonstrate this recurrent characteristic of the target group. Migration does not only occur from the Arab world to Europe but also from Europe to the Arab world, within the Arab world itself, and back and forth between the Arab world and Europe.

A variety of degrees of mobility Interviews also showed that artists and arts professionals have various degrees of mobility. By degree of mobility, we mean the ease with which

one person can move from one country to another.

The degree of mobility often impacts the needs of applicants. Both the content of applications and the interviews suggest a link between the level of mobility and the type of support requested: applicants that may be placed on the lower part of the mobility scale scheme (i.e. artists from the Arab world based in the Arab world presenting no transnational dimension or Arab artists residing outside the Arab world for a long period of time with few travels back to the Arab world) tend to request financial support to develop their work locally, while those that could be placed on the higher part of the mobility scale scheme tend to request mobility related expenses, such as funds for travels or funds to implement transnational actions such as inviting an artist based in another country or organizing a research travel.

Less surprisingly, interviews also indicate a link between the degree of mobility and the types of problems faced by the artists. When going through the experience of migration, artists with a low degree of mobility are more vulnerable to administrative issues like obtaining a visa, finding a place to live, or obtaining visa renewals or resident permits.

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When going through the experience of migration, artists with a low degree of mobility are more vulnerable to administrative issues like obtaining a visa, finding a place to live, or obtaining visa renewals or resident permits.

However, interviews have revealed that all artists new to a given local art sector — migrant artists in a new country or emerging artists in their current countries — find it difficult to comprehend, navigate, and link-up with the art sector of their given locality.

How do they connect with local scenes?

Anchoring to entry points Whether arriving in a new country or starting a career as a young or emerging artist in the country they grew up in, all interviewed artists — whether they are starting their careers or are more settled — shared the fact that the art field is, at first, difficult to understand and navigate. Two main entry points were mentioned and chosen repeatedly by artists to cope with this difficulty: academic or educational programs and mentors and mentorship-related opportunities.

Academic institutions and educational programs play a very important role

Universities are an important funding, administrative, and professional support provider. They have been extensively cited as facilitating entry into a new context, whether the art world of one's own country or the cultural scene of a new one. Comparatively, those who have migrated through other means were confronted with tremendous additional challenges.

Some artists however mentioned the difficulties to get through the academic or educational gate: tuition fees are higher for non-Europeans and government support is not always available for the whole duration of the studies. Finding daily living expenses still remains the hardest part. These obstacles limit the number of individuals that are able to enter these doors.

More settled artists also confirm that educational institutions and residencies play an important role in opening doors to connect with a new country, with curators, spaces and organizations for future participation and strengthening their relationship with a given place.

Mentors and mentorships opportunities are needed

Artists interviewed who are younger than 30 overwhelmingly cited mentors and mentorship-related experiences as a

necessary and highly sought-after entry point to the art sector.

When they were not able to enroll in mentorship programs, interviewed artists entrusted university teachers, program directors, former work or training supervisors, or more experienced artists that they met during a workshop with this role.

More settled artists have expressed their willingness to mentor younger ones, and shared the belief that mentorship is a crucial component of an artist's network.

Transitioning into the local context is very complex

If both educational or mentorship programs are useful to better understand a new environment, a second challenge arises when a program or mentorship ends, and they must navigate the scene on their own. This transitory moment was mentioned by both interviewed migrant or non-migrant artists. According to interviews, two factors may facilitate this transitional phase: circles of friends and local institutional networks.

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Personal friendships play an important role in building up connections

Personal friendships play an important role in building up connections and ties within a new context. The importance of friendly, casual but professionally and socially useful spaces was mentioned repeatedly as a way to better network and therefore integrate within the local art sector. This circle allows for recommendations and advice, and activities and actions to take place. Circles of friends are also an efficient way to meet other like-minded individuals and expand one's contacts and relationship with peers.

Dynamic local institutions have a big impact

If the entry point helps you understand which institutions exist, artists still need time to relate to and understand specific institutions or spaces. A dense, diverse, and active local institutional network noticeably speeds up the creation of local ties within a local context. Active and visible institu-

tions who hold events, offer open spaces, and create circumstances where artists can meet and connect with others have a strong impact on the way artists adapt to a specific context.

Berlin has been cited as a good example of this. The high concentration of institutions, organizations, and collectives from or working around the Arab world has created an environment where it is easier for artists arriving in the city to quickly connect to it and to a relevant field or community.

What are the specific concerns of artists based in Europe?

Transnationality, mobility or forced displacement raise a certain number of specific issues affecting migrating artists.

A strong urge for community building The need for community and collaborations has been stressed by artists from different art fields. Many of the writers based in Europe talked about the need to connect, to meet like-minded writers, to network, and the absence of events or spaces to do so. In the music sector, several interviewees expressed their need for a formal network or support structure. However, there is uncertainty on what should be the binding link of its members. One writer stressed that the need for community should not be based on identity and that there is an urgency to expand, to find new ideas and projects beyond the question of identity. Musicians mentioned that it is crucial to maintain their sense of belonging to a bigger structure that will play an important role in sharing opportunities, experiences as well as becoming a platform to discuss and find solutions to common challenges but without indication on what could lead to this sense of belonging.

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A geographical link of artistic work Transnational experiences directly impact the way artists relate their work to a geographical context.

Although most Arab artists based in Europe at the time of the interview did not frame their work as directly targeting the Arab world, many did state, however, that their work indirectly targets the Arab world, as it is the product of their own history or the knowledge they have of one Arab country or of the region. Similarly, their work is not directly concerned with Europe either. It was generally shared that a multiplicity of knowledges and references makes their practices not linked to a specific region or political positions or statements not directly linked to a specific country. Some interviewees

mentioned preferring to see their practices as concerned with topics rather than geographies.

The question of audience The question of the audience was an issue of relevance for interviewed artists older than 30 years old as younger or emerging artists did not express a clear idea about their desired audience, and were more worried about reaching out to curators, producers, or publishers than to a specific public.

Interviewed artists based in Europe expressed frustration at the lack of understanding of their work from a European audience and at the same time, difficulties in accessing an audience based in the Arab world due to the volatile political situation in the region, censorship, and limited venues. In the music sector, and despite a connection to their new local scenes, some interviewees expressed a feeling of estrangement regarding their performances in Europe, an audience they do not “entirely connect to.”

Creating a critical mass in a single location in Europe has been pointed out as a solution to ease what has been qualified as a disturbing imbalance: producing in one place for an audience that is in another. Artists from the music, literature, and visual art fields frequently cited Berlin as an example of a hub for many Arab artists.

Labeling and representation Another recurrent issue that emerged from the interviews with Arab artists based in Europe is related to the labeling or marketing of their work.

Several artists stressed that even if their work or background is linked to the Arab world, they and their work cannot be reduced to it. A Syrian performance artist highlighted that amongst all the networks she is in, she is always labeled as an Arab female artist, and control over the marketing of cultural projects is an issue she needs knowledge on and skills to address. In this regard, a Lebanese artist also expressly mentioned that she does not want to be framed or categorized as an Arab artist. A Jordanian visual artist referred to “generic festivals that reduce them to the ‘Arab’ world or ‘Syria’ or other generalizations that exoticize their work.” Another

er Syrian visual artist mentioned being often introduced in European and international exhibitions as a “Syrian refugee,” which they found stigmatizing. Two other visual and performance artists also mentioned this tokenization of their work or their background by Western programmers. A Syrian writer mentioned that “the West sees [them] as activists not writers” as their best-known books in Europe are not the literary ones but those dealing with war.

Beyond localities, what about transnational connections?

Networking is defined as the action or process of interacting with others, to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts. Networking is one of the most cited challenges for interviewed artists.

Informal and formal networks It was surprising to see that, apart from academic networks or informal groups of friends, no other networks were cited by the interviewees — despite efforts over the last decade by international organizations to foment and establish networks within and across artist communities, it seems that artists do not rely on such connections to sustain their practices in the manner these efforts were intended to produce.

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It was clear from interviews that social, administrative, and legal realities prevent networks from being translated from an ideal to an operational group or system of interconnecting persons, organizations or other entities. The time needed to build them and obstacles related to visas, prevent most people from the Arab world from traveling, largely contribute to rendering this possibility of larger international meetings and exchanges unfeasible in our current contexts.

Importance of transnational events and programs

Transnational events or programs like the Sharjah Art Biennial, Art Dubai or Mophradat's gathering "Accomplices" were mentioned as spaces that make it possible to bring Arab artists together to share experiences, knowledge, and engage in critical discussion.

Beyond the largest of institutions with regional reach, many spaces in the Arab world are struggling to remain open or have even ceased to exist. With the recent political, sanitary and economic crisis, artistic scenes of Egypt, Syria or Palestine have been cited as shrinking. This has created a

massive gap in opportunity for networking and connecting, especially between artists abroad and the art communities in their home countries.

Away from “home”: keeping links with the Arab world When asked how they follow what is happening in their home country, migrant artists mainly responded that they do not, or that they do, but only through friends or former colleagues.

A Syrian performance artist, for instance, stated that her network in the Arab world is shrinking because she has no connection with the Syrian scene in Syria. A Palestinian visual artist said his network in Palestine is from five years ago and no longer up-to-date.

To cope with that, regular travels have been cited as a way to keep links with the Arab world after departure, further stressing the importance of mobility and the need to overcome its expenses.

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Potential of digital and online tools When discussing the role of digital and online networking tools, there was a general consensus on their potential but also on their current misuse.

Many artists shared their disappointment with the way digital tools are being used so far, especially since the COVID-19 crisis, which mainly consists of moving physical spaces into virtual ones without appropriation or criticality towards these tools.

If most of the interviewed artists are using online tools to access information or for communication purposes, few proposals were cited or made towards a smarter use of the digital or online tools, including taking time to curate new types of online spaces.

Financial and social support Funding is the most reported challenge among interviewed artists. It has been systematically mentioned by interviewees for what it allows: a possible source of regular income, an avenue for connecting with peers, a means of paying collaborators including other

artists or experts, resources for traveling or renting a studio or a workspace. Throughout the interviews, three financial sources of funds were discussed: artists' fees and income; social security and social protection schemes; and grants.

Artists' fees are insufficient

Of the interviewed artists, 90% are not able to earn sufficient income from their art and artistic practice, 60% are freelancers in a field generally linked to the creative industries like marketing, advertising, translation, content creation, or video editing, and 40% are employed, generally at an NGO, or at an art or cultural organization.

This incapacity to generate income from one's art practices is clearly linked to a mismatch between the current dominant economic systems and the nature of the artistic activity itself: some works are difficult to produce or impossible to sell on a market because of their format or content.

Moreover, any artistic activity implies time that cannot be monetized like the time dedicated to research or reflection which in turn increases the overall instability of individuals working in the sector.

Social security and social protection schemes are lacking

Overall, received answers have proved that existing forms of social security and social protection schemes for the arts are severely lacking.

As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, some European states have shifted their social protection floors by adopting emergency and relief measures. Similarly, the nonprofit and philanthropic landscape quickly adapted their work processes and shifted some of their resources to address the needs of the most vulnerable artists and cultural professionals.

However, excepting artists based in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Oslo who had access to "working grants" and "emergency/corona grants" supported by the government, very few of the interviewed artists have reported having had access to one of these state or non-state emergency schemes.

Grants come with a variety of issues

Discussions on grants highlighted different issues that rarely pertained to the scarcity of funds but more often to the funding approaches and environment. The following issues were mentioned by interviewed artists:

Overall complexity of the funding landscape

Political integrity of donors remains unclear

Nature of the expenses covered vary

Eligibility criteria differ

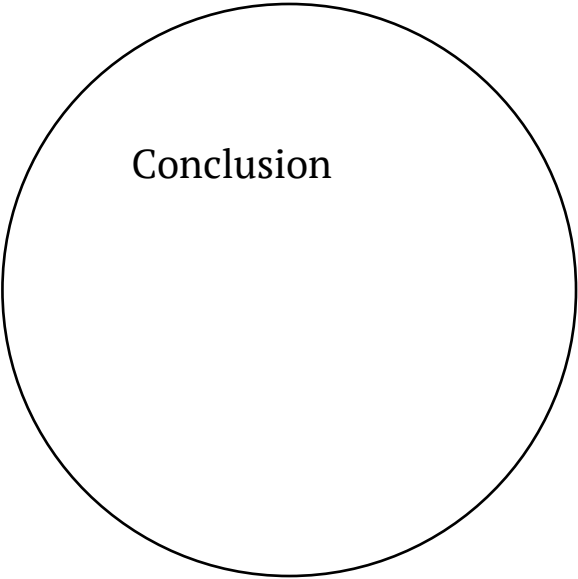
Limited funding methodology and approach

Replication of the educational divide

The eligibility criteria differ which makes funding more difficult to obtain as an individual than as an institution, and eligibility criteria are thought and designed for nationals and not for transnational or migrating artists;

The limited funding methodology and approach which relies on calls for proposals to distribute funds, creates a competitive atmosphere, a market from which emerging artists often feel excluded;

And a replication of the educational divide due to the requirement to submit written applications — of 51 interviewed artists that have applied to Mophradat grant schemes, 100% of artists have completed a higher level education degree of some form.



Conclusion

Conclusions drawn from this research point to the fact that, for the last decade the arts sector of the Arab world has been predominantly financed by international aid and development-related funding structures (nonprofit organization and international public and private actors) in the absence of crucial local public or private funding. This unusual reality makes it difficult for the actors, activities, initiatives, and organizations that make up the art field to consolidate into a proper sector that would find its legitimacy outside of external or superimposed (development) narrative. This funding or support pattern is one of the main reasons why arts production continues to be evaluated based on its social and economic impact and has contributed to establishing a direct link between arts and the level of development of Arab countries, a phenomenon which has further entrenched the idea that art's importance should depend on its results — an inadequate investment and results-oriented logic. Nonetheless, the ground has been laid for dynamic support mechanisms to be established and adapted to the actual needs of artists from the Arab world or who identify with the Arab world, and for the sector to evolve.

What follows are a set of tools and recommendations drawn from the research.

The necessity to redefine concepts and geographical lines The research has shown that today, Arab artists are located both inside and outside the Arab world, often moving back and forth. This produces a continuous flux of cross-border movement that should impose a redefinition of the geographical focus of institutions that support artists from the region.

The fact that this mobility is often only intermittent, and given the high prevalence of transnational practices among artists located within or outside the Arab world, should lead institutions or organizations to adapt the way they target or define this group.

Arab artists are today a transnational community

Programs that only focus on artists based in the Arab world or on artists in a so-called diaspora are using outdated notions⁴ that are not compatible with actual needs or realities. Internationalized contexts, faster means of movement (pre-pandemic), together with new technologies and speedy communications are reasons to change the way migrating people are understood, defined, and circumscribed. Redefining diasporas in this transnational frame allows for an approach that considers a multiplicity of relationships, movements, and networks that goes beyond a single migratory process. These characteristics support the use of the concept of “transnationalism,” as it can be used both narrowly to refer to migrants’ durable ties across countries and more widely to capture not only communities but all sorts of social formations such as transnationally active networks, groups, platforms or organizations, which are in line with the characteristics of the studied group.

Supporting the construction of transnational

narratives Mophradat is well-positioned to further mobilize this community around the concept of transnationalism and the development of transnational narratives. Registered in Brussels, with a focus on the Arab world and with a physical space in Athens, the organization itself is transnational.

A space, such as Mophradat’s new venue in Athens, can contribute to creating a shared sense of connectedness and belonging, and be of relevance to not only the dispersed but also mobile and transnational artists that constitute the Arab arts community. The Athens venue is a space where remote localities and disparate experiences can converge.

The venue can facilitate the construction of common experiential frames, thus playing a crucial role in the processes of groups interactions and identification, as well as of the legitimation and delegitimation of power dynamics and social or geographical hierarchies by unfolding and proposing renewed forms of professional and peer relationships.

There is a mismatch between mainstream funding practices and the actual needs of the art sector

Building on reliable data and experiences After years of practice and provided support, organizations committed to the art field should further build on their large community of artists and on their internal data and resources to generate and share knowledge with a larger group of actors, design non-financial support schemes based on linking people and organizations.

It has to be related to the dynamics among the whole community, within which support organizations are an integral part, and should be geared towards establishing regular conversations between individuals and organizations, in different localities, and with reliable experiences.

Further studying and learning from available data and exploring new ways to use and invest in collective physical or digital spaces could lead to the multiplication of new types of support.

Promoting new granting approaches and support schemes It is clear that the dominant granting approach, which involves responding to a call, with a defined idea for a project, which is limited in time and with a predefined result, is not suited to the arts sector and the nature of artistic practices.

Support schemes that avoid result- or project-oriented approaches should be encouraged. We can cite for instance Mophradat's Writing Sabbaticals grant scheme, that allows artists to focus on their work at home and provides a monthly stipend adapted to the country the artist is based in.

A series of simple to more ambitious measures are considered in relation to Mophradat's work and its position in the field and are detailed in a longer inhouse version of this report. These measures allow for a shift in the "temporary and outcome-based" grantmaking paradigm to an emphasis on strategies that prioritize predictability of income, decent work conditions, and fostering solidarity among different

actors of the sector. These include all-year round open calls, stronger curatorial lines, direct support to artists, process-oriented or sabbatical schemes, or facilities that allow support structures to pay for basic costs or fees as direct costs and not only incidentally as part of a project grant or so.

Ultimately, to be forward-facing and effective, what is needed are inventive support programs that generate much-needed safety nets, and help establish the conditions for artists to be able to practice sustainably, as individuals and as a community.

Footnotes

4 See Tsagarousianou, R., (2017) "Rethinking the concept of diaspora: mobility, connectivity and communication in a globalised world", *Westminster Pa-*

pers in Communication and Culture 1(1), p.52-65. doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.203>. Accessed 21 March 2021.

About the writer

Nadia Cherif is invested in helping funders, civil society organizations, and social entrepreneurs enhance their skills and resources, and foster locally-driven development. Qualified as a lawyer in France and specialized in European Union law, Nadia worked at the European Commission on EU External Aid Policy in Tunis and Brussels, and since 2011, has collaborated with various human rights and cultural organizations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, including Mophradat. She regularly shares her analysis and insights on the region's funding environment at conferences and through publications, and has designed tailor-made funding schemes to help funders innovate how they support their communities.

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