

POINTS OF CULTURE IN PANAMA



EDUCATION **GOVERNANCE** CITIZENSHIP
TRAINING COMMUNITIES **SKILLS**
CRÉATIVIDAD **DIVERSITY** PEACE **ARTS**

1. Background

Panama City was founded 500 years ago and is the oldest European settlement in the Pacific Abya Yala region. The metropolitan area is part of the Panama District, which is home to about 60% of the country's total population. Panama is considered to be one of the most globalized capitals on the continent, with a thriving economy based mostly on various services linked to the inter-oceanic route. It also boasts a significant level of cultural and biological diversity.

The city sits on a very narrow strip of land that is 2,561 km², and is made up of a highly complex, multiethnic, and multicultural society. Geologically, the isthmus is part of Central America, while

culturally, it is much more unique. The city has historical links with South America, specifically Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador as a result of Spanish colonialism. Additionally, the area is home to a significant Afro-Panamanian diaspora. This is the result of the waves of Afro-Antillean immigration between 1846 and 1914 that arrived for the construction of the transisthmian Panama Canal Railway. This has had a profound impact on Panama's social makeup. Since the 20th century, it has become increasingly connected with the United States, economically and politically.

2. Panama and Culture

In Panama, culture has not been a mandate under local governments, except for financial support given to isolated events. Of course, these do not reflect a programmatic approach. This institutional failing at the municipal level is the result of management methods established by the central government over the last 40 years.

The prevailing view in Panama has always conflated culture with folklore, or understood culture as a synonym for high culture and artistic creation. This propagates the idea that culture is simply a creative excess or social wealth accessible only to a small minority. This superficial and elitist understanding of culture excludes multiple and varied forms of culture.

“POINTS OF CULTURE” IS AN EXERCISE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF CULTURE, CULTURAL RIGHTS, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN WHICH SCHOOLS SERVE AS COMMUNITY SPACES TO DEVELOP CULTURAL, ARTISTIC, AND SOCIAL PROCESSES.

In 2012 the former mayor of Panama City, José Isabel Blandón, promoted the creation of a Ministry of Culture that provided a regulatory framework for updating the cultural policies of today's National Institute of Culture (INAC). The law was passed unanimously in the National Assembly, but subsequently vetoed by the Executive, and the issue was not reopened for two years.

In 2014, the City Hall of Panama, alongside the Directorate of Culture and Citizen Education, set out a programmatic strategy for the five-year period up to 2019. The goal was to ensure that the cultural rights of all people and communities in the Panama District are recognized, promoted, and guaranteed within a society that respects equality, human dignity, and non-discrimination.

One of the emblematic programmes under this municipal public policy is that of “Points of Culture”. The project was originally developed by Célio Turino in Brazil, and uniquely adapted for Panamanian life. They involve cultural centres and citizens in formal schools that offer a minimum of eight artistic, educational, and leisure activities on Saturdays. The result is that one school in each township will act as a community space and serve as an incubator for cultural, artistic, and social processes. Special attention is paid to the development of life skills that bolster citizenship and communities while strengthening the social fabric.

In 2019, Panama was selected as the Ibero-American Capital of Culture and also designated a UNESCO Creative City of gastronomy. Additionally, it has recently joined *Ibercocinas* (Ibero-cuisines), which is a local coordination effort focused on the main overall agendas of culture and development.

3. Objectives and Project Implementation

3.1. Primary and Specific Objectives



The main goal is to create a community ecosystem in six public schools under the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA) where cultural governance and cultural rights can be enhanced through a recreational training platform. The initiative will take a multidisciplinary, intercultural, intergenerational, and citizen coexistence approach.

Specific objectives:

- Establish an interinstitutional agreement that allows the City Hall of Panama to transparently manage funds provided by the Ministry of Education for developing the Points of Culture programme
- Train and teach education staff, cultural managers, parents, and those involved in participatory or pedagogical social methodologies on the development of life skills, citizenship building, the STEAM methodology, and creative thinking
- Create a system of indicators that help measure impact
- Map out and promote artists and community cultural managers so they can become cultural ambassadors
- Develop cross-cutting projects to understand and prevent school dropout rates, violence, unwanted pregnancies, child labour, and more
- Promote the creation and/or strengthening of community culture and development councils where the regional cultural life is always showcased and managed
- Establish synergy between the city's agenda and agendas of communities participating in the Points of Culture programme, so as to facilitate access to events for those living in peripheral areas

3.2. Project Development

Main Actions Carried Out

In the mornings and afternoons, children and adolescents can access a wide range of activities such as painting, music, modern dance, hip hop, robotics, mathematics, juggling, creative writing, recycling,

urban gardens, putty, storytelling, gastronomy, Indigenous language classes, film clubs, and more. Specific workshops and courses are run by specialists in social pedagogies, popular education, and artistic techniques, which helps stimulate creativity and intelligence.

The City Hall has access to facilities, instruments, materials, and adequate spaces within the schools, to promote community consultation and safety processes on the campuses. Ministry of Education schools and their educational communities offer space and logistics support.

The City Hall also offers an ongoing training cycle in partnership with higher education institutions. This is added value for tutors, artists, and others who promote cultural management issues, project development, and pedagogical approaches in arts education. Additionally, the population has regular and organized access to community learning processes for the production, management, and socialization of goods and services that are democratically defined as essential for peaceful coexistence, plurality, and cultural diversity.

THE PROGRAMME'S SUCCESSFUL PILOT PHASE WAS CALLED "CREATIVE SUMMER". IT TOOK PLACE FROM 2015-2017 AND HAD 5,000 ATTENDEES. POSITIVE FEEDBACK BY PARTICIPANTS AND THE EDUCATION COMMUNITIES REAFFIRMED THE PROJECT'S RELEVANCE TO THE COMMUNITY.

4. Impact

4.1. Direct Impact

Impact on the Local Government

1. Promotion of citizen participation (more than 5,000 people through cultural educational training processes in the pilot phase)
2. New institutionalization of culture at the local government level
3. Improvement of decision-making processes and cultural governance: Promotion of bottom-up processes whose main participants are the communities in six townships throughout the capital district
4. Renovated physical spaces and new public cultural infrastructure where cultural rights can be exercised
5. Establish a position and alliances in sustainability networks

Impact on Culture and Local Cultural Actors

1. Recovery and revaluation of intangible heritage and public spaces (participants in training processes are empowered and add to the cultural value chain through the public)
2. Skills development: cultural managers and artists receive professional training on social outreach and tools for participating the creation local and national cultural policies
3. Entrench a culture of accountability and impact mediation
4. Revitalize the organizational social fabric through partnerships
5. Promoting processes that salvage historical memory
6. Intercultural dialogue



Impact on the Territory and Population

1. Greater equity has been established for culture in budget allocations at both the local and national levels of government, in compliance with recommendations from international organizations like UNESCO
2. Optimization of State resources through greater participation by community actors, employing an innovative, cooperative, problem-solving approach that also develops processes for governance of culture
3. Those involved in the programme have spread and expanded its influence, energizing debates on culture and development at the national level

“POINTS OF CULTURE” HAS SUCCESSFULLY ESTABLISHED DIALOGUE ON CULTURAL RIGHTS (OUTLINED IN THE FRIBOURG DECLARATION), AGENDA 21 FOR CULTURE, AND THE SDGs IN MUNICIPALITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

4.2. Assessment

The programme has an impact evaluation strategy that will use a mixed methodology. The approach uses a system of variables and indicators constructed from an established baseline, and formed by data taken from the pilot phase and from the project’s implementation between April 2018 and December 2019.

With respect to cultural rights, various indicators will evaluate the goal of increasing the population's access to creative spaces and activities for education, culture, and recreation. This will involve a human rights approach that encourages participation in populations with the lowest attendance across the Panama District.

To evaluate the level of inclusion, indicators will measure the objective of providing education centres with the minimum conditions required for carrying out the scheduled activities in public spaces.

Other indicators will assess progress in relation to the governance of culture.

4.3. Key Factors

Part of the success of the Points of Culture project is the new relationship dynamics it promotes with the State from local governments or communities. The main role of the national government is to facilitate processes while more local entities must have the adequate organizational freedom to self-manage all aspects of life within the territories.

Although the success of each cultural centre will vary according to the specific driving forces of each community, the high level of inequality across Panama City highlights the vital need for these arts and culture facilities, and emphasizes the importance of this project.

THE POINTS OF CULTURE PROJECT AIMS TO CREATE AN ECOSYSTEM THAT WILL HELP REBUILD THE SOCIAL FABRIC. TO THIS END, THERE HAVE BEEN CLEAR CHANGES TO INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE VIEWS OF CULTURE, WHICH INCREASES CHANCES FOR THE PROJECT'S SUCCESS.

4.4. Ongoing Work

Efforts are being made to ensure that the district of Panama has a law on culture, which includes the Points of Culture programme as one of its main components. Although the above depends on the political will of the Municipal councillors, as the project develops, the aim is to increase awareness within communities about their cultural rights.

5. Further Information

Panama was a candidate for the third "UCLG Mexico City – Culture 21 International Award" (November 2017 - May 2018). The jury for the award drew up its final report in June of 2018, and requested that the UCLG Committee on Culture promote this project as one of the good practices implemented under Agenda 21 for culture.

This article was written by Alonso Ramos, Deputy Director of Citizen Education for the District of Panama / Betania Township, Panama.

Contact: Alonso.ramos@municipio.pma.gob.pa

Website: <https://mupa.gob.pa/>