

# Unveiling the Power of Art and Culture: Enhancing Mental Health and Social Engagement in the South Mediterranean with Insights from Catalonia



*The problem is that  
we are repetitive  
when we need to be  
creative.*

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## ABSTRACT

The decline in mental health is indeed a significant global concern, with rates plummeting worldwide. Fortunately, there is growing recognition of the potential of arts and culture to enhance brain health and overall well-being. In response to this pressing need, successful initiatives have emerged, particularly in Europe. In this report, we showcase some of these initiatives from Catalonia as exemplary models.

Furthermore, this report delves into the intricacies of the South Mediterranean region, examining the cultural capacity, social dynamics, and factors influencing both the economy and the cultural ecosystem. By studying these specificities, the report aims to establish a roadmap that can be applied to develop similar initiatives across the South Mediterranean region, drawing from the successful pilot cases in Catalonia. The proposed roadmap, outlined in the report, serves as a strategic guide, offering actionable steps and recommendations to facilitate the integration of arts and cultural interventions into the promotion of mental health in the target countries.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organisation [WHO] (WHO, 1946), health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being beyond the mere absence of disease. Within the context of health promotion, health has been considered as a resource that enables individuals to lead an individual, social, and economically productive life, forming a direct link between health, productivity, and the economic prosperity of nations. It is a positive concept that emphasises social and personal resources, as well as physical abilities (WHO, 1986). The key is in this state of well-being. Mental well-being refers to people's ability to reflect, clarify values and beliefs, manage stress, be flexible, as well as to adapt to life's changes.

Culture and art play a significant role in promoting brain health and overall well-being. Engaging in cultural activities such as music, dance, theatre, literature, and visual arts has been linked to various cognitive, emotional, and physiological benefits. One of the main ways in which culture and art promote brain health is through their ability to stimulate neural networks and enhance cognitive functions.

Participating in artistic endeavors involves complex mental processes such as creativity, problem-solving, and emotional expression. These activities can lead to neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to reorganise itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. For example, learning to play a musical instrument or engaging in a painting workshop can strengthen neural pathways associated with memory, attention, and executive functions.

Moreover, cultural experiences often evoke emotions and feelings that can have a profound impact on mental health. Art therapy, for instance, has been used as a therapeutic intervention for individuals dealing with anxiety, depression, trauma, and various neurological conditions. The act of creating or appreciating art can reduce stress levels, improve mood, and enhance overall psychological resilience.

Additionally, culture and art contribute to social connectedness and community engagement, which are essential aspects of brain health. Participating in cultural events, visiting museums, attending concerts, or joining artistic groups can foster social interactions, support meaningful relationships, and combat feelings of loneliness or isolation. Strong social connections have been linked to better cognitive function, emotional well-being, and a reduced risk of cognitive decline in older adults.

In summary, culture and art play a multifaceted role in promoting brain health by stimulating cognitive functions, supporting emotional well-being, and fostering social connections. Embracing creativity and cultural experiences as part of a healthy lifestyle can have long-lasting benefits for brain health across the lifespan.



*Children running on the beach.* Joaquín Sorolla. 1908.

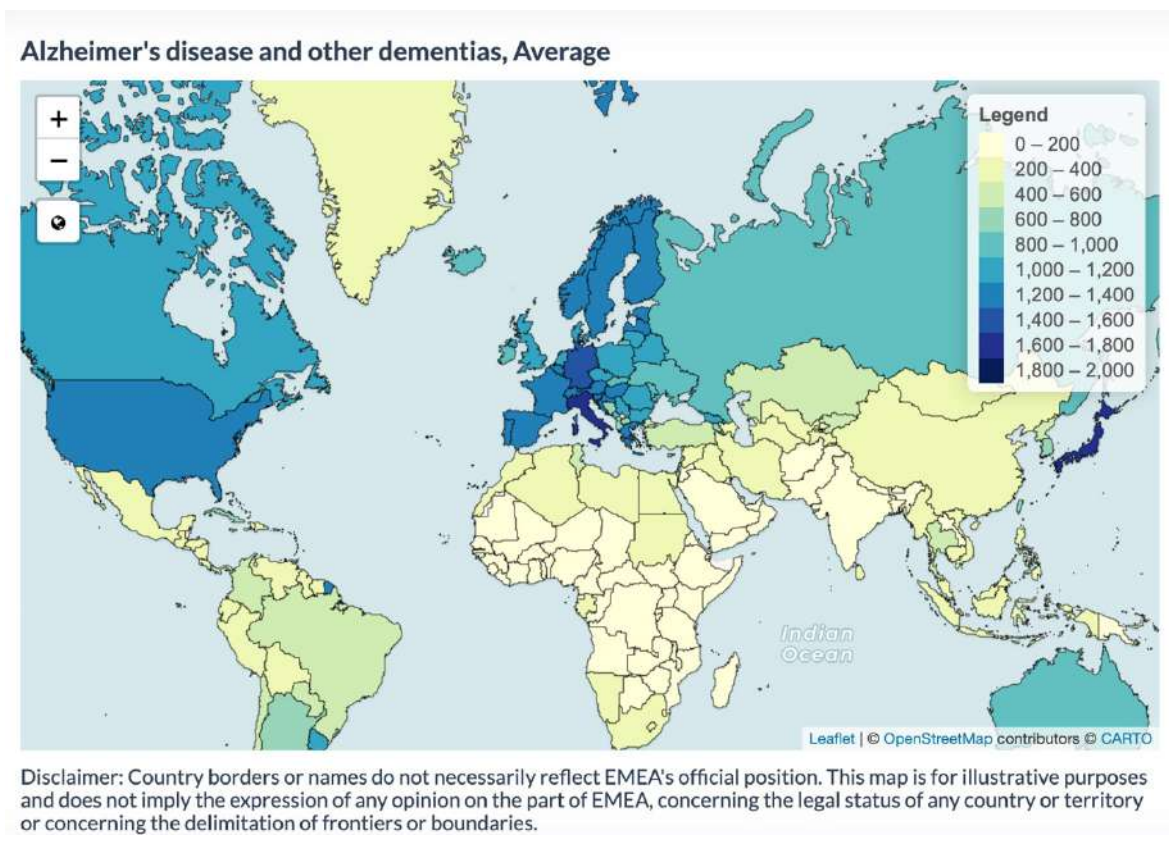
Known as the painter of light, Sorolla's painting illustrates the concept of wellness as fullness.



Unfortunately, we are confronting a rise in mental health issues around the world. Depression impacts approximately 280 million people globally (WHO, 2021). During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO reported an unprecedented 25% increase in the global prevalence of anxiety and depression. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these pre-existing mental health inequities (WHO, 2022).

On average, 55% of Europeans were at risk of depression during the spring of 2022, due to the impact and uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the cost-of-living increases resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021; OECD & European Union [EU], 2022). Mental illness is the primary cause of disability worldwide and is closely related to the risk of suicide (Heeringen, 2022; Pan American Health Organisation [PAHO], 2019; Too et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the likelihood of people with a mental health disorder attempting suicide (Barlattani et al., 2023).

Alzheimer’s disease and other dementia prevalence are increasing, as highlighted below from EMEA’s Brain Capital Dashboard<sup>1</sup>.



Source: EMEA Brain Capital Dashboard.

Considering Alzheimer's fast progression and the traditional lack of health resources to deal with it, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear we need to be creative when confronting the problem. One potential question is: Can we transform the arts and culture that already exist in many areas into spaces that can also promote well-being and social participation in the face of diseases like Alzheimer's?

This report examines in detail the beneficial role of arts and culture in promoting mental health, well-being, brain health, and social participation. The **first section** reviews the literature concerning health and mental health. The **second section** reviews the role of arts and culture in enhancing mental health and well-being. The **third section** elaborates on the context regarding access to artistic productions and the development of the Creative and Culture Industries (CCI) in Mediterranean countries. The **fourth section** provides an overview of various cases and initiatives aimed at improving mental well-being and brain health through exposure to artistic creations and fostering creativity. The **fifth section** presents a proposal to replicate successful initiatives from Catalonia in Southern Mediterranean countries. The **sixth section** presents some conclusions. The **seventh section** proposes an action plan to capitalise on the creative potential of the South Mediterranean region as a vehicle to promote brain health in the South Mediterranean region.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://research.euromed-economists.org/brain-capital-dashboard/>

## 1. HEALTH

The WHO (2022) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which everyone realizes their potential to cope with normal life stresses can work effectively, and can contribute to their community. The absence of mental disorders does not necessarily mean the presence of good mental health. People living with mental disorders can also achieve good levels of well-being and lead a satisfying and meaningful life, despite the limitations of their symptoms.

Until the 1960s and 1970s, the medical model of health prevailed, which viewed disability as an individual pathology that should be remedied through medical intervention, ignoring its social dimension. This model has been questioned by multiple movements and disciplines. The term for health in English derives from the Anglo-Saxon English *hælb*, which, taken from the proto-germanic word *hailipō*, means integration, completeness, and holism derived from the Greek word *holos*.

The civil rights movement and disability studies emphasised its social determinants. Within this new paradigm, people with disabilities were seen as citizens with full rights (Dossa, 2009). The Ottawa Declaration for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) recognises the inextricable links between people and their environment, forming the basis for a socio-ecological approach to health, advocating the mutual need to care for each other, our communities, and our natural and cultural environment. The Jakarta Declaration (WHO, 1997) on guiding health promotion into the XXI century endorsed these strategies and demonstrated that global health approaches are the most effective. This approach considers participation as essential, placing people at the centre of health promotion action and decision-making processes, in order for them to be effective.

Brain health means a well-functioning brain that is characterised: a) by an absence of chronic anxiety, low mood, addiction or apathy; b) by an absence of brain disorders, including schizophrenia and other psychoses, as well as dementias; c) the presence of age- and education-appropriate level of cognitive functioning; a culturally-appropriate set of social skills sufficient for a stable social network; a basic sense of control or agency over some aspects of the external world; a basic sense of control over emotions and actions sufficient to avoid self-defeating or self-destructive consequences; and an adequate sleep pattern resulting in a feeling of being rested and alert (Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association, n.d). Brain health is supported by healthy development over the life course, including prenatal, childhood, and old age.



Mental health is shaped by social, economic, and physical environments. Risk factors are strongly associated with social inequalities (WHO, 2014). The large health inequalities between countries are caused by an unequal distribution of power, income, and services and the resulting injustices that affect the population's living conditions. The structural determinants and living conditions, combined, constitute the social determinants of health (Commission Social Determinants of Health [CDSH], 2008), which are 1) Nutrition; 2) Transport and housing; 3) Stress; 4) Social support; 5) Social position; 6) Addictions; 7) Early experiences; 8) Work; and 9) Unemployment. The social determinants for health are highly present in the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in its 2030 Agenda (Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales y Agenda 2030, 2023). Measures must be taken to improve living conditions, starting before birth, progressing through early childhood, childhood, adolescence, family building, working age and into old age. The action throughout these life stages provides opportunities to improve the mental health of the population and to reduce the risk of mental disorders that are associated with social inequalities (WHO, 2014).

There is no agreement on the causes of mental illness. According to psychiatry, the source of some mental illnesses is brain chemical imbalance. Cultural determinism views it as a mere social construction of a particular era and culture. Madness is dependent on our cultural interpretation and can become a crude fiction to condone dissidents. It is conceived as a social construction and as a symbol of social contradictions, but it is also a form of suffering that incapacitates an important part of the world's population. Social theories study the impact of social relationships, along with economic and political structures. A frequent relationship has been established between psychosis and social class. Schizophrenia is linked to work conditions.

As will be explained in the following sections, the arts can play a significant role in improving health.

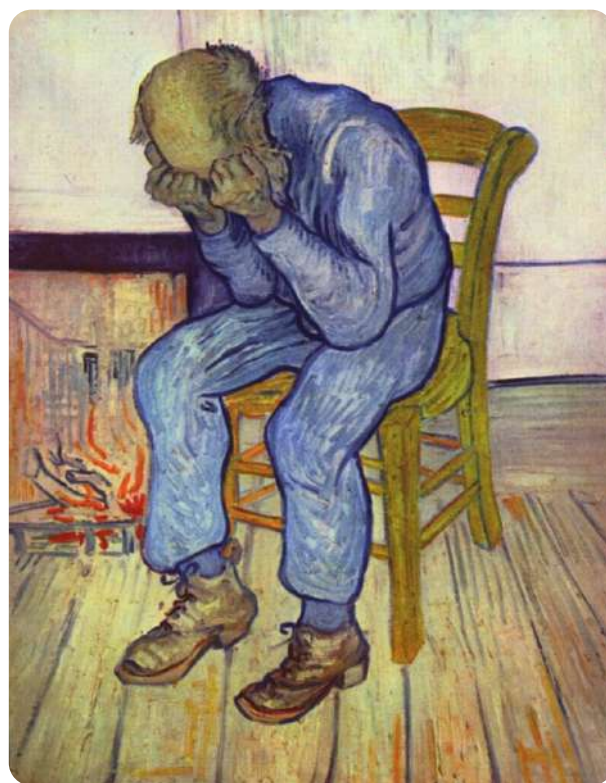
## 1.1. Stigma and prejudice

*My paintings do not sell, but one-day people will appreciate their value.* **Vincent Van Gogh**

People with mental illness are stigmatised and face social prejudices. Symbolic interactionism teaches us that we do not relate to the people themselves but to the meaning we associate with them. This relationship can be determined by prejudices. Human groups maintain mutual positions of hostility and rejection based on conflicts or imaginary fears. People think negatively about other people without having sufficient motives and they act hostile towards other people simply because they belong to a certain group. In other words, they form prejudices (prejudicial).

Prejudices are judgments or concepts formed without prior verification of the validity of the facts (Zanden, 1995). Goffman (2006) defines stigma as an attribute that is profoundly devaluing, which degrades and lowers the bearer of the same. Stigma can be considered as a mark (attribute) that links a persona to unwanted features (stereotypes). It is a characteristic of people that goes against the norm of a social unit, considering the norm as a shared belief directed towards behaving in a particular way at a specific moment. The stigma that affects people with some mental illness has a direct impact on their daily lives. For most people, having a mental health problem is equivalent to being crazy, and therefore, they show rejection towards this person. Belonging to a stigmatised group affects the well-being and quality of life of its members.

Individuals with some mental health illness define stigma as the main obstacle to recovery, well-being, and quality of life, as it creates social isolation and difficulties in finding work, acquiring housing, or participating in the community. Stigma theory was constructed to explain its inferiority and to account for the perceived danger of the stigmatised person, rationalising animosity based on other differences, such as social class. Stigma confronts normality versus abnormality. The concept of a normal human being may originate from the medical approach or large-scale bureaucratic organisations. Without social contact, a person who isolated themselves may become suspicious, depressed, hostile, anxious, and disoriented (Goffman, 2006). Several art projects dealing with Mental Health stigma will be presented in the 4<sup>th</sup> section.



*Sorrowing old man. 1890. Vincent Van Gogh.*

## 1.2. Mental health promotion and the recovery framework

Mental health should be promoted whilst tackling the social stigmas and prejudices that prevent mental disorders. We aim to develop positive mental health (WHO, 2022), which is understood as a state of well-being where individuals can cope with everyday stress, work productively, lead a fruitful life, and contribute to their community. This positive mental health contributes to social cohesion and social capital, which, in turn, enhances peace and stability in the environment. Mental health represents one of the principles shared by European democracies, as reflected in the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2017) on mental health. This declaration considers mental health as a sanitary, economic, and social priority. Thus, it calls on European healthcare systems to formulate mental health strategies that integrate the promotion and prevention of associated determinants and risk factors. This should include therapeutic interventions, rehabilitation, care, and social support, enhancing community care and comprehensive care networks, and working effectively to reduce stigma. Jané-Llopis & Anderson (2005) emphasise strategies, such as: 1) Promoting mental health in the workplace; 2) Attending at-risk groups for mental disorders; 3) Preventing depression and suicide; 4) Preventing violence and toxic substance use; 5) Reducing situations of social and financial disadvantage and preventing stigma. Arts can be used to promote these strategies. For example, we can include creative activities to improve mental health in the workplace, to counterbalance boring and repetitive job processes. Arts groups are being implemented amongst at-risk populations or as a preventative tool.

Many countries have demonstrated that it is possible, even in times of crisis, to address the reality of suicide through effective clinical-social interventions. Canada and Finland are examples of countries that, even amidst the pandemic, sought to decrease their suicide mortality rates through government interventions aimed at reducing employment and housing uncertainties, in addition to the provision of timely and quality psychiatric services (Partonen et al., 2022). Culture and creative industries (CCI) are a powerful strategy to create employment and promote mental health and economic development, as will be established in the 3<sup>rd</sup> section.

The concept of recovery is one of the standards of care that responds to the need for effective mental health promotion. Recovery is a process of personal change in attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and/or roles. Its relevance lies in a paradigm shift where the health professional, when dealing with mental health cases, focuses his efforts on the patient as a person and not on the symptoms of the disorder itself, which implies that the patient recovers not only his state of health, but also his self-esteem, dignity, and well-being. This practice promotes the strengthening of personal spheres such as self-awareness, hope, spirituality, and strength of will.

In Catalonia, community psychiatric resources are using care features focused on recovery, such as the Individualised Care Plan teams, that use a modification of the assertive community treatment model, which provides comprehensive care (housing, socialisation, symptoms, training, work, spirituality, amongst others); however, not all Community Rehabilitation Services are prepared to provide it (Sampietro et al., 2023). On the other hand, programmes such as *Activa't per la Salut Mental*<sup>2</sup> promote the personal recovery model within the social and professional fabric of the country (Rojo et al., 2019). The aim of this programme is: 1) to accompany people with mental health problems in the construction of a life project and 2) to promote social support networks. Arts are included in this process as part of the meaningful life project. This project was founded by mental health survivors (people who have experienced mental health problems) and receives support from the Catalan Government Health Department.

It is widely known that many of the most esteemed artists have had a significant relationship with mental distress. Van Gogh is one of the references regarding the link between art and mental health. His work "*Blossoming almond*" was painted for his newly born nephew and godson, who was baptised with the name Vincent. Flowering trees announce the beginning of spring and new life. This painting is one of the best representations of aspects like hope, which is crucial in the context of recovery.



*Almond tree blossoming. 1890. Vincent Van Gogh.*

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://activatperlasalutmental.org/>



## 2. ART, CULTURE AND MENTAL HEALTH

With rising mental health concerns, arts and culture engagement offers an accessible, equitable opportunity to combat mental health inequities and impact upstream determinants of health (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

Culture is the learned set of socially acquired traditions and lifestyles held by members of a society that include their ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Harris, 1990). According to Dyck (1998), culture encompasses ideas, concepts, and knowledge and includes beliefs, values, and norms that shape standards and behavioral rules in everyday life. Bauman (2002) distinguishes two ways of understanding art and culture: one views it as the activity of a free spirit, able to resist norms and stand out from the ordinary, whilst the other presents it as an instrument of continuity and social order, a coherent system of pressures supported by sanctions, of internalised values and norms that guarantee the preservation of tradition; thus, they can be understood as instruments of social control emancipation.

Creativity involves the skill (rather than the gift) of bringing about something new and valuable. Young (1985) notes the relationship of creativity with good mental health. Newness is described as originality, statistical infrequency, a change from tradition, renovated, rejuvenated, or regenerated past ideas, and a unique personal expression.

Artistic praxis, beyond a fundamental Human Right, is a key element in promoting mental health. Furthermore, it enables people with mental illness to live more meaningful lives. One paradigmatic example is Yayoi Kusama, one of the most highly valued artists in the world of contemporary art. She voluntarily admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital in Japan. She leaves it every day to go to her art studio.



Yayoi Kusama. ©Photo by Susanne Nilsson under Creative Commons license.



Recent years have seen an accumulation of studies and initiatives designed to examine the application of arts- and culture-based strategies for public health concerns (Golden et al., 2023; Jensen, 2020). The WHO report (WHO, 2019) on the use of art and culture synthesises worldwide evidence on the role of the arts, with a specific focus on Europe. Over the past two decades, there has been a major increase in research into the effects of the arts on health and well-being, alongside developments in practice and policy activities in different countries across the WHO European Region and further afield. This report synthesises the global evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being, with a specific focus on the WHO European Region. Results from over 3000 studies identified a major role for the arts in the prevention of ill health, promotion of health, and management and treatment of illness across the lifespan.

The reviewed evidence included study designs, such as uncontrolled pilot studies, case studies, small-scale cross-sectional surveys, nationally representative longitudinal cohort studies, community-wide ethnographies, and randomised controlled trials from diverse disciplines. The beneficial impact of the arts could be furthered through acknowledging and acting on the growing evidence base, promoting arts engagement at the individual, local, and national levels, and supporting cross-sectoral collaboration. The review found evidence from a wide variety of studies using diverse methodologies. Overall, the findings demonstrated that the arts can potentially impact both mental and physical health. Results from the review clustered under two broad themes: 1) Prevention and promotion, with subtopics as to how the arts can affect the social determinants of health, support child development, encourage health-promoting behaviors, help to prevent ill health, and support caregiving. 2) Management and treatment with subtopics as to how arts can help people experiencing mental illness; support care for people with acute conditions; help to support people with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders; assist with the management of non-communicable diseases; and support end-of-life care. Research studies also drew on theories from diverse disciplines. A spectrum of research designs was included: uncontrolled pilot studies, individual case studies, small-scale cross-sectional surveys, nationally representative longitudinal cohort studies, community-wide ethnographies, and randomised controlled trials. Research methods included biological markers, psychological scales, neuroimaging, physiological assessments, behavioral observations, interviews, and examinations of clinical records. However, this report triangulates findings from different studies, each with a different set of strengths, which can help to address the weaknesses or intrinsic biases of individual studies.

Art is a vehicle through which a person can communicate, express pain, or alleviate suffering, enabling people to express themselves freely in everyday life (Guardiola & Baños, 2020). Art is a channel of communication, the transmission of ideas, and the expression of emotions (Gordo, 2022). Art improves the quality of life for people with disorders and their caregivers (Monzó et al., 2019; Simó et al., 2017). It promotes cognitive (García et al., 2012), psychological and emotional well-being, improving self-confidence, self-perception, and socialisation (Guardiola & Baños, 2020; Mirabella, 2015). It promotes the evocation of memories, sensations, and emotions (Vásquez, 2020), providing people with early-onset dementia with spaces for creativity, pleasure, and communication, promoting better self-image and learning (Ullán 2011, 2022). The aesthetic and emotional components of art activities can provide opportunities for emotional expression, emotion regulation, and stress reduction (Juslin, 2013). Emotion regulation is intrinsic to how we manage our mental health (Mennin & Farach, 2007; Fancourt et al., 2019). Art promotes inclusion and a sense of belonging in the community (Senent, 2016). It is a powerful strategy for social transformation (Castillo et al., 2012). Abad et al. (2021), summarising over a decade of interventions at the Thyssen Museum in Spain, stressed the importance of co-creating art spaces that foster social participation whilst breaking stigmas and enabling genuine and real interaction with vulnerable groups. Arts and culture institutions must contribute to (as they already do) the great challenge of developing inclusive and accessible policies for all individuals (Jardón, 2016). Furthermore, promoting health through art and culture has been demonstrated to be cost-effective (Zbranca et al., 2022).

Mental illness should not be a barrier to accessing culture and artistic creation (Senent, 2016). In recent years, museums operating as artistic and cultural institutions have begun to experience a shift in their conception and objectives. This is particularly evident in their social propositions, by no longer being a reserved space for specific cultures and social classes but, instead, generating experiences for social groups that the system had marginalised, such as individuals with mental disorders; using art to put the person and their strengths at the centre. This is the beginning of moving towards inclusive communities, initiating social and cultural transformation and well-being (Carnacea, 2016). In addition, museums have shown interest in making their spaces and collections more accessible, promoting the participation of diverse populations, and attending to the plurality and complexity of citizens (Coca, 2016).

Over the last decade, museums and galleries around the world have actively promoted their social values as active agents in community-based practices. The concept of “Museums on health” has emerged. Following these practices, museums in the United Kingdom have been included as active agents in programming for vulnerable populations, including users of mental health services. Research has shown that museums provide opportunities for social interaction, relaxing experiences, learning, and acquiring new skills, leading to increased self-esteem, well-being, a sense of belonging, inspiration, opportunities, and purporting social inclusion. Nowadays, museums have started to play a role in healthcare, with specific initiatives contributing to 10 medical areas - including mental health - in groups of people with severe mental disorders (Mangione, 2018). The role of museums is increasing in community well-being initiatives and health promotion (Levent et al., 2014). Museum visits reduce the number of appointments, outpatient visits and hospitalisations for people with mental illness (Thomson et al., 2018).

Similar experiences have been developed in Spanish and Portuguese museums, with the participation of the author of this report. The projects have taken place at Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, Madrid (Abad, Díez, Ferreras, Gamoneda, Hernández, Salazar, & Simó, 2021) and at Serralves Foundation, Porto (Simoes, Marques & Simó Algado, under press) with participants from the mental health community services. In both projects at Thyssen and Serralves, the use of art and creativity showed a positive effect on increasing mental health well-being, social participation, and the fight against stigma.

### 3. CULTURAL AND CREATIVE VIBRANCY IN THE SOUTH-MEDITERRANEAN REGION: AN OVERVIEW

The socio-economic situation in most of the target countries of CREAT4MED<sup>3</sup>, including the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI), has been affected by the political context and the crisis. Knowing the context of these countries, it will be important to study the investment opportunities in CCI, in order to preserve and promote mental health using arts and culture in each country.

Arts and culture are powerful resources for improving the mental health and well-being of the population. On the other hand, CCI can create meaningful employment opportunities. The first section of this report highlights the importance of the social determinants of mental health (CDSH, 2008), including employment. The development of CCI is at different stages across the South Mediterranean region.

#### Palestine

Currently, the population of Palestine stands at 5,371,230, with the majority falling within the age group of 15-64 years, which is 2,824,582. According to the World Bank [WB] (2021), the economy is unstable and fragile, previously due to the COVID-19 pandemic and socio-economic factors and, more importantly, political issues. Aside from economic factors, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita stood at USD 3,663 in 2021, resulting in a 9.1% deficit due to the COVID-19 pandemic and reduced external international financial support (MAS, 2021 cited in CREAT4MED, 2022a). On the other hand, the unemployment rate in 2021 was 24.9% (female: 39.7% and youth: 41.9%), albeit the female labour force participation rate was 16.6% (aged 15+). Regarding the GDP linked to cultural activity, it is known that in 2017 it "represented 2.3% of total employment and accounted for 66,311 jobs (44,710 for men and 21,601 for women)" (CREACT4MED, 2022a, p.7).

Taking account of the above, CCI has the potential to create significant job opportunities for young people and women, contributing to economic growth - but they are neither recognised nor defined in Palestine. However, it is linked to "handicrafts as an industry" (CREACT4MED, 2022a, p.4). Here it is important to mention that CCI is not recognised as a basic need, therefore it is not a priority amongst governmental, private and international donors. Civil society is one of the main actors promoting Palestinian identity, heritage, and culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Israel

Despite that, one governmental initiative was to include a policy on tourism and culture in The Palestinian National Development Plan 2021-2023, focusing on the importance of “cultural identity and heritage based on the Palestinian narrative” (Palestinian Cabinet, 2021). Also, the Palestinian Ministry of Culture (MoC), which was expected to have a budget of around USD 10.4 million for 2022 (USD 4.3 million earmarked for salaries), created three programmes: “*Culture for all*”, “*Cultural heritage protection programme*” and “*Administrative Programme*” (MoC, 2021 cited in CREAT4MED, 2022a). Additionally, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Empowerment (MoEE) aims to “promote innovation within micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), enable innovative companies to access finance and support startups and new businesses with better services and better legislative protection” (CREACT4MED, 2022a, p.16).

Also, CCI establishments represent around 2% of all establishments in Palestine; the number of non-governmental Cultural Centres, according to the PCBS, was 577 in 2021 (PCBS, 2021, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022a). It is important to say that in 2014, there were 666 centres, with the reduction being mainly determined because of the reduction in external funding and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The media market (music, cinema, and visual arts) in Palestine “has shown an average annual growth rate of 3% between 2015 and 2018, reaching \$73 million in 2018” (Arab Media Outlook, 2018, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022a, p.6), with the highest composition being from Print (47,57%), TV (24,27) and Digital (8.74%). Also, between 2014 and 2017, there were 12 national feature films that were produced (UNESCO, 2022). Considering the advanced and new trends in the CCI, there are huge opportunities for the fields of music, films, visual arts, design, and handicrafts. According to data on exports and imports, it is known that in 2019 the total exports in cultural activity was \$3,536,034 USD (0.32% of total exports), mainly in visual arts, crafts, and goods (63.8%) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics cited in CREAT4MED, 2022a). Regarding imports, they represent 0.31% of the total.

The cultural infrastructure is divided into Museums (32), Theatres (14), Cinemas (2), Libraries (104) and Cultural centres (non-governmental) (528). For the development of innovation, competitiveness, and cultural promotion, it is important to say that Palestine is not amongst the 193 member states of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO).



Some of the international CCI initiatives in Palestine are *Creative Palestine, Ramallah City of Music, Cre@ctive, Innomed Up, Crossdev and All Around Culture*. "The Local Development through the Rehabilitation and revitalization of the Historic Built Environment in Palestine (...) A New Approach to Drama for Deprived Children, Youth and Young Adults and Palestinian Culture Fund" (CREACT4MED, 2022a, p.22).

Promoting arts in Palestine holds immense significance, especially during the current times of conflict and war that have had a severe impact on the mental well-being of citizens. Art can serve as a powerful tool for healing and resilience-building, particularly for individuals experiencing trauma and psychological distress. The creative expression offered by various art forms, such as visual arts, music, theatre, and literature, provides a means for people to process their emotions, share their stories, and find a sense of empowerment amidst adversity. In a war-torn environment, where communities face constant stress, fear, and uncertainty, engaging in artistic activities can offer moments of solace, hope, and inspiration. Moreover, promoting arts in Palestine can also contribute to preserving cultural identity, fostering social cohesion, and amplifying voices that are often marginalised or silenced. By investing in arts programmes, workshops and initiatives, the community can create safe spaces for expression, promote mental well-being and nurture creativity, as a catalyst for positive change and healing in challenging times.

## Jordan

Jordan has a total population of 11,337,053. The GDP per capita in 2021 was \$4103 USD, with 2.36% of the GDP in 2018 being attributed to the CCI. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 27.23% (vs 13.81% that were working) and that the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 36.76% in 2021 (vs the 34.77% that were working). Regarding the Global Gender Gap Rank, Jordan was 122/146 position in 2022 (World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap, 2021, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022b), and the Gender Inequality Rank was 118/170 in 2021. Moreover, it is known that the "female participation rate is one of the lowest in the world (15%)" (CREACT4MED, 2022b, p.3). Also, in 2020 the main fields that made an employment contribution were: Cultural education (23%), Architecture and engineering (23%) and Software and computer games (19%) providing a combined employment of 25,339 in 2018.

On the other hand, CCI is not seen as a priority, so the government has not dedicated specific attention to specific strategies. , This is supported by the reduced budget that the Ministry of Culture (in 2021, it represents 0.1% of the total government budget) (Jordan Government Budget, 2020, cited in CREAT4MES, 2022b). "In this vein, there are high levels of informality, especially amongst creative workers, which puts them amongst the vulnerable groups of population" (CREACT4MED, 2022b, p.22).

Nevertheless, nowadays Jordan has the Economic Growth Plan 2018-2022 and there is a specific reference to the CCI development. Some NGOs and royal foundations are also contributing to handicraft development such as: The Noor al Hussein Foundation, The Jordan River Foundation, The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development and the Royal Society, Young social entrepreneurs and so on.

The media market in Jordan has shown an average annual growth rate of 2% since 2014, reaching \$317 million USD in 2018. Nevertheless, print is still the biggest media industry (Arab Media Outlook 2016-2018). Also, talking about the added value of CCI, it could be said that the architecture and engineering sector (32%), followed by printing and publishing (22%), and software, computer games and electronic publishing (18%) are the main sectors. According to exports and imports in 2020, the reports say that total CCI exports were 0.26% GDP (114 million USD) and 0.91% GDP for imports (401 million USD). Regarding exports, the main ones were Art crafts (43.86%) and Publishing (37.69%). On the other hand, imports show mainly the same areas of CCI (48.62% and 27.16% respectively).

The cultural infrastructure is divided into Museums (15), Theatres (3), Cinemas (24) and Libraries (26). It is important to mention that actors such as government, private sectors, associations and NGOs and academia are not particularly coordinated to develop CCI in Jordan. The country joined WIPO in 1972, nevertheless there is insufficient protection of copyrights. Finally, some of the international CCI initiatives in Jordan are the *Masarat grants programme*, *Creative Jordan Palestine*, *Cultural Heritage Creates Jobs*, *Rise Talent Contest* and *All Around Culture* (CREACT4MED, 2022b).

## Morocco

Morocco, which has a population of 37,840,044, with a largely youth-led population (of around 70%). The GDP per capita in 2021 was USD 3,795, with GDP suffering a reduction rate of -7.1% because of COVID-19. In 2018, 2.36% of GDP was attributed to the CCI. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 13.52% (vs 20.9% that were working) and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 24.89% in 2021 (vs the 26.81% that were working). In respect of the Global Gender Gap Rank, Morocco was 136/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022c) and the Gender Inequality Rank was 104/170 in 2021.

Morocco has made the CCI a national priority. "The creation of the Federation of Creative and Cultural Industries (FICC) was a strong signal for the CCI private sector in Morocco and an illustration of the willingness to synergise the different private players in the sectors and to advocate the CCI's expectations with the Government" (CREACT4MED, 2022c, p.16).

Additionally, artists' status is recognised by law number 71-99, of June 19th, 2003. The above is important because "artists can obtain a professional card and are required to sign a contract with their employer" (Gruber, 2019 cited by CREAT4MED, 2022c, p.16).

Morocco is a country with a rich and diverse cultural background, with handicrafts being strong drivers for the tourism industry, attracting around 12 million visitors to the country every year. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis contributed to the tourism sector underperforming in 2021 (WB, 2021). Numerous historic sites, like Rabat, were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012. Also, the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication has classified 216 historical sites and monuments. Additionally, the public budget for culture increased to around 45 million euros for 2021 (45.45% of the increase) (Azdem et al., 2022).

The CCI Figures in Morocco are coordinated by FICC, which promotes Publishing and booksellers, Audiovisual, Cinema, Visual and graphic arts, Performing and choreographic arts, Music and live performance, Cultural institutions and multidisciplinary spaces, and Events organisation and communication. "Digital media was subject to the highest growth (19%). Meanwhile, the share of physical music and physical games has shrunk by 5%" (Arab Media Outlook 2016-2018, cited by CREAT4MED, 2022c, p.8).

In contrast to Palestine and Jordan, Morocco has public policies focused on CCI. These policies promote innovation, inclusiveness, and new emerging and promising CCI. The film industry is certainly amongst the most promising and advanced of the emerging CCI. Around 15 major film festivals have been organised, such as the Marrakech International Film Festival and in 2019 there was a total budget of €70 million invested by foreign productions shot in Morocco. Major film studios, institutions and training courses are also dedicated to audiovisual and film professions, master's programmes and academic training.

According to exports and imports in 2020, the reports say that the total CCI exports were 0.14% GDP (169 million USD) and 0.73% GDP for imports (839 million USD). Regarding exports, the main one was Art crafts (76.69%). On the other hand, imports show mainly the same CCI (60.66%). The cultural infrastructure is divided into Museums (80), Theatres (69), Cinemas (31), Opera House (1), Cultural houses (24) and Libraries (640). Finally, some of the international CCI initiatives in Morocco are *Think Tanger*, *Afrique Créative*, *Media Art Morocco*, *Micro-Folie program*, *Bibliotobiss* and *All-around Culture* (CREACT4MED, 2022c).

Morocco has successfully integrated Culture and Creative Industries (CCI) into its political landscape, setting an inspiring example for other countries in the region.

## Lebanon

Lebanon has a population of 5,353,930. The GDP per capita in 2021 was \$4,136 USD. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 18.64% (vs 29.35% that were working) and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 19.45% in 2019 (vs 49.02% that were working). Regarding the Global Gender Gap Rank, Lebanon was 119/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022 cited in CREAT4MED, 2022d) and the Gender Inequality Rank was 108/170 in 2021. Also, in the Global Competitiveness Rank of 2022, Lebanon was placed 84 out of 133.

The context of Lebanon is that it is living through multiple crises, such as a currency crisis, banking crisis, social unrest, and political instability, that have had a devastating effect on CCI workers. "During COVID-19, full-time employment in creative sectors fell by more than two thirds, whilst unemployment or underemployment increased by almost 1000%" (GIZ, 2021 cited by CREAT4MED, 2022d, p.4). Additionally, the blast in Beirut on 4 August 2020 affected the CCI, because all spaces dedicated to this industry were completely or partially destroyed. The above, "has had devastating effects on the economy and as a result, talented, qualified young people and families have left or are planning to leave the country" (CREACT4MED, 2022d, p.3).

This country is a key regional player in some of the sectors and sub-sectors of CCI, such as: design, advertising, architecture, fashion, gastronomy, and publishing (UNIDO, 2015). This achievement is because of private and international initiatives, not because of government support. Some sectors that added value to Lebanon, often with low fixed investment, are industry, tourism and the knowledge economy.

According to exports and imports in 2020, the reports say that the total CCI exports were 2.81% GDP (509 million USD) and 1.36% GDP for imports (246 million USD). Regarding exports, the main one was Publishing (64.10%). On the other hand, imports show that the main sectors were Visual arts (43.70%), Art crafts (25.16%) and Publishing (22.02%). The cultural infrastructure is divided into Museums (55), Theatres (25), Cinemas (185) and Libraries (87). There are also plenty of festivals that play a significant role in the Lebanese cultural scene.

"The main actors in the CCI in Lebanon are the international community, private stakeholders, and investors" (CREACT4MED, 2022d, p.11). Talking about the international community, UNESCO works for the preservation of cultural heritage and museums, and one of their tasks was to rebuild several destroyed premises. Nowadays, Kafalat is running a programme in collaboration with the

WB entitled “Building Beirut Businesses Back & BeWer (B5) Fund”. In addition, the French Institute in Lebanon helps Lebanon to support the cultural scene in general through programmes, events, and cooperation schemes.

Lebanon does not have any clear governmental support or targeted policy actions around CCI. To support the above, it is known that in 2020 the Ministry of Culture received just 0.21% of the country’s budget. Although Lebanon joined the WIPO in 1986, it does not appear amongst the 153 contracting countries of the Patent Cooperation Treaty.

Finally, some of the CCI international initiatives in Lebanon are the *Masarat Grants programme*, *Ebtedy, Med Gaims (Gamification for Memorable tourist experiences)*, *Heritage (ICT Mediterranean platform for UNESCO Cultural Heritage and Arts and Culture Entrepreneurship (CREACT4MED, 2022d)*.

Like Palestine and Jordan, investing in CCI presents a significant opportunity to enhance the welfare and well-being of Lebanese citizens. Lebanon has faced multiple economic and political crises, including trauma associated with the banking and currency crises. Embracing CCI can provide avenues for economic diversification, job creation and cultural expression, offering a ray of hope and resilience in challenging times.

## Egypt

Egypt has a population size of 112,716,599. The GDP per capita in 2021 was \$3,698 USD. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 24.28% (vs 15.34% that were working) and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 15.07% in 2021 (vs 32.86% that were working). It is important to say that most jobs created in the handicraft sector are informal. In respect of the Global Gender Gap Rank, Morocco was 129/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022 cited in CREAT4MED, 2022e) and the Gender Inequality Rank was 109/170 in 2021.

Egypt has a very rich cultural heritage and CCI is diverse in the country. Nevertheless, their contribution to the economy remains modest. In 2020, a budget for “Youth, culture and religious affairs” represented 2.6% of the total expenditure. Here, it is clear that there is no main interest in CCI because there is not a specific budget, just a general one.

The main visible sub-industries are Crafts, Design, Publishing and Digital Media concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria. Cultural events are also concentrated in these two cities (80% and 15% respectively).



Regarding exports and imports in 2021, the reports say that the total CCI exports were 0.20% GDP (839 million USD) and 0.22% GDP for imports (889 million USD). For exports, the main one was Art crafts (87.65%) concentrated in the MENA region. On the other hand, imports show that the main sectors were Art crafts (58.09%) and Publishing (24.53%).

“Egypt is the first country in the MENA region to establish a successful film industry. Cairo was referred to as “the Hollywood of the Arab World” with a golden age of Egyptian cinema from the 1940s to the 1960s” (CREACT4MED, 2022e, p.7).

The cultural ecosystem in Egypt is very rich and diverse. The infrastructure is divided into Museums (81 in 2019, attracting 5,316,000 visitors), Theatres (40), Cinemas (78), Opera houses (3), Cultural houses (374) and Libraries (2222). There are also many Cultural Associations (250), Islamic, Coptic, and Pharaonic archaeological Regions (141), Newspapers (67) and Books published (1,925).

Nowadays, the national agenda of Egypt Vision 2030 is working on the Rowad 2030 project that “aims to enrich the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship and to build an inclusive and integrated entrepreneurial ecosystem for young people and the general population to achieve the goals of Egypt’s Vision 2030” (CREACT4MED, 2022e, p.17). Finally, some of the CCI international initiatives in Egypt are *Creative Design*, *Zein al Kofouf*, *Developing Inclusive*, and *Creative Economies (DICE)*, *All Around Culture*, *Creative Mediterranean*, and *USAID’s Sustainable Services Activities* (CREACT4MED, 2022e).

## Tunisia

Tunisia has a population size of 12,458,223. The GDP per capita in 2021 was USD 3,807. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 24.71% and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 33.21% in 2017 (vs the 42.21% that were working). Regarding the Global Gender Gap Rank, Tunisia was 120/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022f) and in the Gender Inequality Rank the country was 61/170 in 2021.

The current economic and political context in Tunisia is fragile and unstable, causing inflation, external debt, sluggishness, and unemployment rates to increase. In contrast to some other countries mentioned above, in Tunisia the culture is recognised as one of the strategic axes for development, appearing “under the policy axis “Human Development and Social Inclusion.” This objective related to the “cultural dimension, between creation, openness and rootedness” (CREACT4MED, 2022f, p.4). Nevertheless, CCI is not yet officially recognised by public authorities. But again, in contrast with other countries, the Budget for the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 2021 represented 0.68% of the general government budget.

One strategic note of the five-year development plan 2016-2020 is that it created many initiatives to support entrepreneurship, such as the Start-up Act, resulting in 8.9% of labelled start-ups being activated in creative industries, receiving 11.4% of capital funding (Start-up Act Annual report 2019-2020). According to exports and imports in 2021, the reports say that the total CCI exports were 0.62% of GDP (292 million USD) and 1.06% GDP for imports (498 million USD). Regarding exports, the main one was New Media (69.44%). On the other hand, imports show that the main sector was Art crafts (64.10%).

In Tunisia, the cultural infrastructure is divided into Museums (25), Theatres (49), Cinemas (18), Opera house (1), Festivals and concerts (376), Cultural houses (230) and Libraries (423). In addition, in 2018 it was inaugurated as the City of Culture that represents the largest public cultural structure in terms of budget and cultural activities and outreach. The Centre consists of three theatres, a museum of modern and contemporary art, three exhibition halls, a cinematheque (small archive cinema), an archive for letters and books, a centre for the cultural digital economy, as well as an area dedicated to the institutions of scenic arts, visual and cinematographic arts (CREACT4MED, 2022f, p.8).

In contrast, the government of Tunisia is the leading actor within CCI, injecting financial resources focusing on the already existing talents and supporting market access for young artisans. After the COVID-19 crisis, the country created a Fund (Recovery Fund for Culture) with the objective “to enable artists, intermittent performers, operators and private cultural spaces to overcome economic difficulties” (CREACT4MED, 2022f, p.15).

Tunisia joined the WIPO in 1975 and has developed 64 IP related laws and signed 65 treaties. Tunisia is placed 73/132 in the Global Innovation Index. Some of the CCI international initiatives in Tunisia are *B'chira Art centre*, *Ciné Mad'Art*, *Dream City*, *Laaroussa*, *TFANEN*, *Creative Tunisia*, *Creative Europe Desk -Tunisia*, *PACT*, *All Around Culture*, *Afrique Créative*, *Patrimoine 3000* (CREACT4MED, 2022f).

## Algeria

Algeria is a country with a total population of 45,606,481, with a GDP per Capita of USD 3,690 in 2021. Regarding unemployment, in 2021 the female rate was 22.13% and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 29.34% (vs the 23.05% that were working). Regarding the Global Gender Gap Rank, Algeria was 140/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022) and in the Gender Inequality Rank the country was 126/170 in 2021.

According to exports and imports in 2017, the data shows that the total CCI exports were 0.0008% of GDP (1.4 million USD) and 0.33% of GDP for imports (576 million USD). Regarding exports, the

main one was New Media (68.90%). On the other hand, imports show that the main sectors were Publishing (35.83%) and Art crafts (26.21%).

There is no information about CCI enablers and cultural infrastructure. Regarding the WIPO, Algeria joined in 1975 and is ranked 115/132 in the Global Innovation Index. Finally, in 2017 the total number of national feature films produced was 12 (CREACT4MED, 2022g).

In Algeria, there is a possibility for CCI to be developed and this represents a good opportunity for the country.

## Israel

Israel is a country with a total population of 9,174,520, with a GDP per Capita of USD 52,170 in 2021. Regarding unemployment, the female rate was 4.94% in 2021 (vs 58.58% of female labour force participation) and the youth (15-29 years) unemployment rate was 7.40% in 2021 (vs 43.70% that were working). Regarding the Global Gender Gap Rank, Israel was 60/146 position in 2022 (Global Gender Gap, 2022, cited in CREAT4MED, 2022h) and in the country's Gender Inequality Rank was 22/170 in 2021.

According to exports and imports in 2021, the data shows that the total CCI exports were 0.19% GDP (USD 938 million) and 0.55% GDP for imports (USD 2679 million). Regarding exports, the main ones were Publishing (37.08%), Visual Arts (28.08%) and Audiovisual (20.19%). On the other hand, the main sectors for imports were Visual arts (42.17%) and Art crafts (19.55%). Israel joined WIPO in 1970 and is ranked 16/132 in the global innovation index. Finally, in 2017, the total number of national feature films produced was 28 (CREACT4MED, 2022h). Israel is a country with a strong tradition of entrepreneurship, where cultural entrepreneurship related to CCI can further develop.

## Overall

Overall, the Cultural and Creative scene in the South Mediterranean region holds significant untapped potential. Unlike more developed regions, the cultural scene in this area is not very advanced, presenting a unique opportunity for growth and innovation. The region's favourable demographic structure, characterised by a high proportion of young people, with rich cultural heritage, provides a solid foundation for the development of CCI.

Promoting arts is essential for enhancing mental health and well-being in the region. The South Mediterranean region has faced numerous crises, including political instability, economic challenges, and social upheavals, leading to widespread trauma and stress amongst its people. Engaging in cultural and creative activities offers a therapeutic outlet for individuals to express themselves, to cope with trauma, and find sources of resilience and inspiration.

## 4. EXPERIENCES

### 4.1. Cultural and Artistic projects from Catalonia (showcase projects)

In Catalonia, a number of experiences reported by the Generalitat de Catalunya (2023) can be highlighted.

The **Campus Vall de Hebrón + MNAC project**<sup>4</sup> is targeted at women of diverse cultural backgrounds with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to provide therapeutic benefits through the value of art. Based on a collaboration agreement signed between Vall de Hebrón Hospital and the National Art Museum of Catalonia, they have undertaken various activities intended to explore the potential of art as an instrument for patients and families to enjoy its therapeutic and emotional benefits. The objective of this project is to obtain more scientific evidence of the benefits of art in health.

**Recuperart 19**<sup>5</sup> addresses the consequences of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis on healthcare professionals, whose emotional well-being has been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, with unpredictable sequelae if not effectively addressed. The Catalan Institute of Health, in collaboration with the Department of Culture, proposes the use of museums as environments for reflection and emotional well-being improvement for overall healthcare.

**Radiación +++**<sup>6</sup> is an artist residency programme at the Oncology Radiotherapy Service of the Arnau de Vilanova University Hospital. Radiación +++ takes a reference frame from the contemporary art programmes that have been carried out in French hospitals since 2000, established through an agreement between the Ministries of Health and Culture of the French state. The aim of these types of residencies is for the artist to act as a mediator between the various agents that make up the hospital community and develop an artistic project that serves as a communication channel inside and outside the hospital, based on the needs of members of this community.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.museunacional.cat/en/community-programmes>

<sup>5</sup> See [https://ics.gencat.cat/ca/Recuperart19/index.html#googtrans\(ca|en\)](https://ics.gencat.cat/ca/Recuperart19/index.html#googtrans(ca|en))

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.poliedrica.cat/es/radiacion/>

**Relato-Hos**<sup>7</sup> is a project that promotes creative writing as an additional therapeutic tool for patients during their hospitalisation at Bellvitge University Hospital. Relato-Hos invites the patients admitted to the approximately 30 hospitalisation units at Bellvitge to write a story, or any other creative text, during their stay at the centre. Every patient who decides to participate receives a folder with writing material to create their text, which is then collected by the nursing professionals. The initiative aims to make hospitalisation more pleasant by harnessing the therapeutic power of writing.

**Atlas del laberinto** (Atlas of the Laberint)<sup>8</sup> involves various Catalan museums and a selection of their works is the backdrop for the workshop, aimed at professionals to reflect on violence against women. It is a project through which professionals in the healthcare system want to be aware of macho violence, using the arts and museums as a place of reference. The project is based on the premise that macho violence is conditioned by communicative interference. The aim is to create an atlas of communication resources, so that professionals can detect and deactivate these interferences and recognise the communication strategies of individuals who suffer from gender-based violence, to enable understandable and resilient communication and empower those involved in any of the actions outlined in the Protocol for addressing gender-based violence in Catalonia's healthcare setting. During the workshop, around twenty participants observed various displayed art pieces and engaged in debates, moderated by a cultural manager, about the communicative aspects. This is done to reflect on violent attitudes that can occur in daily actions, covering both the most obvious and those that may remain hidden in the background.

## 4.2. Art and cultural projects co-led by the author

### Projects to promote mental health among children and teens.

Until now, society has intervened in the face of mental illness reactively once the mental pathology has already been developed. It is essential to establish a mental health promotion policy, placing special emphasis on the social determinants of mental health. This policy must be developed in schools.

The author has developed intervention projects in various schools in Catalonia, such as the Sinia school in Vic, the Dominican school in Vic and the Congost school in Canovellas. In all of them, the objective is to empower students (children and adolescents), as well as teachers, to improve their mental health wellbeing. For this, students must be able to identify the different emotions and learn positive ways to express them.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://bellvitgehospital.cat/en/relathos-project>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://icscampdetarragona.cat/es/el-ics-impulsa-el-taller-atlas-del-laberinto-de-las-violencias-machistas-en-el-museo-de-arte-moderno-de-tarragona/>



Methodology: This is done through a series of creative workshops that are generally included during the plastic arts hour of the school programme. During these workshops, in each of the sessions, we work with a different artistic movement, the students make one artistic movement that is work inspired and we work on a specific feeling that we have related to said movement.

Thus, we can dedicate a session to working on expressionism, through the work of Edward Munch. The participants carry out a project related to expressionism, and we can dedicate that session to talking about anxiety. Another session we can dedicate to surrealism, through authors like Joan Miró. We can dedicate this session to talk about dreams and hopes. We work with various artistic movements, ranging from urban art to land art, in a total of 8 to 12 sessions associated with different feelings.

With adolescents, we formalise this project more in urban art languages, such as graffiti and rap. For this, we teach adolescents both to make graffiti and create thorough workshops. The lyrics of the raps that they compose express all the emotions that they feel, and which generate discomfort. These projects have been financed from the social work of La Caixa (foundation), as well as through European funds.



Project developed at Congost school in Canovellas.  
We introduce rap to help teens to express their emotions.



Project developed at La Sinia School in Vic.

### **Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona**

We can cite the experiences of people suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's, led by the author at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona CCCB (Simó et al., 2017)<sup>9</sup>. The CCCB Alzheimer project opened at the centre on Mondays, for people with dementia/Alzheimer's, their caregivers and family members. This is pertinent, given these are people with dementia/Alzheimer's, so it is extremely important to adapt the sessions, modulating the inputs from the different collections. Being a contemporary art centre, many of the pieces have sound and images. For that reason, some screens were closed, and audios muted, to ensure the well-being of the participants and the capacity to focus on the 4-5 chosen pieces for the session.

Each week, there was a different participant group, normally composed of 8-12 people, plus caregivers and family members. The groups repeated the visit when the CCCB changed the main exhibition (every 3 months or so). This was done through a partnership between CCCB and institutions working with people with dementia/Alzheimer's.

The sessions lasted approximately 1.5 hours. During each visit, 4-5 masterpieces that had been previously selected from the CCCB's educational service were highlighted. They were chosen to promote interaction with the participants. For example, in one exhibition about Africa, a toy was used to start a dialogue about their toys and the games they played during their childhood, to promote reminiscence. The CCCB educational team led the session and our mission as the University of Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC) was to develop research (Simó et al., 2017), in order to understand the impact of the project. The impact was very positive, especially as it was connected to cognitive well-being, emotional well-being, and social participation. This project was funded by the Centre of Culture of Barcelona CCCB and has developed more than 10 editions.

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<sup>9</sup> See [http://repositori.uvic.cat/bitstream/handle/10854/5291/artconlli\\_a2017\\_simo\\_salvador\\_cultura.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://repositori.uvic.cat/bitstream/handle/10854/5291/artconlli_a2017_simo_salvador_cultura.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

The conclusions from the research about the CCCB Alzheimer project highlight the following positive outcomes (Simó et al., 2017):

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1. Positively impacted the well-being and social participation of users.
  2. Improved emotional well-being, creating enjoyment. Humor was very present during visits to the CCCB.
  3. It had a significant impact at a cognitive level, stimulating attention and interest, orientation towards reality, and greatly facilitating the evocation of memories. What stands out in this section is the enjoyment of novelty, very close to learning.
  4. Participation in the programme removed situations of isolation and exclusion in which users find themselves. Facilitated social interaction during the sessions; mutual aid relationships between the users themselves were relevant.
  5. The evaluation of the programme was very positive from caregivers and relatives.
  6. Educators played a key role in this success, facilitating personalised care, encouraging the participation of all users, taking care to adapt of the sessions and validating the participation of the users.
  7. The accessibility of the museum was a very important aspect within the framework of inclusive trends now being adopted by museums.
  8. The temporal arrangements, human resources, and the nature of the exhibitions themselves were the main limitations of the programme.
  9. The caregivers proposed extending the duration of the sessions, as well as their regularity. The educators' proposals were oriented towards the expansion of the team and improving accessibility.
  10. It highlighted the positive impact that the programme has on both caregivers, family members as well as educators.
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Project at the CCCB.  
©Photo by Blanca Miguel.

### **Auditorium and National Orchestra of Catalonia**

At the Auditorium with the National Orchestra, we again worked with people with dementia/ Alzheimer's, caregivers, and family members, but we also included a second group of people with diverse intellects. The visits were developed on Thursdays. Each group was composed of 12 people (plus caregivers). Each group did a single visit. The methodology used was: 1) Musicians from the national orchestra received the group at the hall and played 3 pieces for them, selected depending on the group and their interests (15 minutes). 2) The participants assisted the National Orchestra of Catalonia's rehearsal (15-20 minutes). 3) The participants developed a music therapy workshop during the last part of the visit, playing different instruments, such as violins and guitars. It was conducted by 2 music therapists (45 minutes). Again, our role was to develop research to understand the impact of the project.



Project developed with the Auditorium and National Orchestra of Catalonia.

This project was founded by the Apropa Cultura programme from the Catalan Government, which has developed several editions. Our research showed that the 10 key elements that guarantee the success of this programme and that can serve as proposals or guidelines to promote sociocultural policies in other institutions are (Simó Algado, under revision):

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1. The cultural institution. Carrying it out in a highly prestigious cultural entity, such as the Auditorium with the National Orchestra, guaranteed the interest of users as it is a cultural and leisure centre recognised by the community.
2. The potential to practice the arts - especially using music as a means of social contact and non-verbal expression, encouraging participants' motivation, communication skills and social interactions.
3. To give access to top-level artists. Attending the National Orchestra rehearsal is an opportunity that is highly valued by the participants, since it is not an activity that can be done regularly. Furthermore, the proximity and the nature of the dialogue must be promoted amongst the interpreters who participate in meetings with users.
4. The professionalism of the people who directed the activity. An important point to highlight is that the people who led the activity are music therapists, as well as musicians, with the experience and skills to guide the group of selected users. In this way, communication with participants was favoured and participation was encouraged by creating a bond with users, adapting the activity and communication to the needs of each group.
5. The workers of the institution. The great involvement and motivation in the activity shown by the cultural institution's workers made it possible for it to develop in the best possible way.
6. To promote social relationships inside and outside the group. The dynamics of the activity favoured interaction between the different participants (users, professionals and companions), resulting in a positive atmosphere and guaranteeing success. Furthermore, the involvement of caregivers and family members in the activity was very important for promoting social relationships and strengthening the bond between caregivers and users.
7. Adaptive activity. Adapting each part of the activity on a cognitive and physical level, based on the needs of each person in the group, allows users to become interested and avoid situations of frustration, loss of interest, or attention if they cannot follow or get involved in the activity.
8. The combination of active and passive participation. This facilitates the active participation of users, especially in the last part of the musical workshop, so that they stop being passive agents who attend an audition, thus increasing their well-being.



9. The possibility of individual expression. Freedom of expression was promoted through music, whether free or guided, in the last part of the activity (the musical workshop).
  10. Community and cultural participation. Participation in community and cultural activities outside the centres contributed to the maintenance of the subjective well-being of the people who participated, as it was a motivating and rewarding social experience that also facilitated social relationships. For this reason, it became necessary to offer cultural activities that can provide well-being to society, through cultural programmes that are recognised in public health initiatives.
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### **Serralves Foundation in Porto**

The methodology was based on a selection of pieces from the foundation, to encourage dialogue with the participants, people with mental health problems. The selection was not based on the artistic value of the piece; they were selected to promote a dialogue related to topics that we want to explore (such as stigma, identity, recovery, mental health, feeling of belonging, etc.). The first author spent 2 days at Serralves Foundation in December 2022, to choose a total of 24 masterpieces that would be used during the implementation of the project, during the first semester of 2023. The 12 visits were developed weekly with groups of 8 to 10 participants (the same group) from a mental health community service. The project was possible thanks to a partnership with Serralves Foundation, Politecnico de Porto, and the University of Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC). The sessions were led by a couple of occupational therapists.



The author during the selection process in front of the mentioned painting, Paula Rego's *A cela*, 1997.

As an example, one of the pieces selected at Serralves foundation was Paula Rego's *A cela* to reflect what is health, mental illness and its perception from society. This project was founded by the own researchers from UVic-UCC and Politecnico de Porto. This was the first edition of the project.



### **Parelles Artístiques (Artistic couples)**

In this project, a person with mental health problems develops a creative process with an artist from the local community, working as equals for several months, with both participating in the project on a volunteer basis. The people with mental health problems are from Osonament, the community mental health service. Osonament is also responsible for finding an artist from the community who wants to be part of this artistic experience. Several artistic languages such as painting, sculpture, music, photography, etc. are developed. The couples met every week, normally in the artist's workshop or at a community art centre over a 3-month period or so. At the end, these works are displayed in local museums around Catalonia and in art centres. This part is very important, as it is focused on dealing with the stigma and prejudices against people with mental illness. This is especially accomplished through the exhibiting of the pieces around museums throughout the country. The project is founded by BBVA Bank Foundation. The project is already in its seventeenth edition and has spread throughout Catalonia from Vic (Osona), a testament to its success.

As UVic-UCC, we are leading the research to understand the impact of the project. Fundamentally, a doctoral thesis is being developed. The Ph.D. student is Jaume Cases, and the thesis is directed by Salvador Simó. This research is funded by the Industrial Ph.D. programme from the Catalan Government. The research is being conducted right now. Results are expected by the end of 2024. One aspect of this can already be highlighted, which is related to its power to diminish the stigma towards mental health and its contribution to the recovery process of the participants.

### **Vic: Culture and wellbeing**

The most outstanding project directed by the first author is Vic: Culture and Wellbeing. This project began in 2017 and has made its way to all the cultural and artistic institutions in the city of Vic, which has a population of 50.000, and is empathetic to people with dementia / Alzheimer's. We went from working with one institution to working with all the arts and cultural resources across the entire city.

Furthermore, the project has evolved to include people with mental health problems, refugees, and those with intellectual diversity. Last year (2023), a programme was created with over 40 activities designed specifically for these groups. Since 2017, all activities have been free of charge and designed specifically with the target audience in mind.

The project has become a reality thanks to a powerful partnership between UVic-UCC, Vic city council (Department of Culture and Department of Social Welfare), all the art and culture centres (Medieval Museum, Museum of the Art of the Leather, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Cineforum, Inclusive orchestra, Atlantida performing arts centre, Vic Punt Zero) and the institutions working with people with dementia (SAITS, ASHES, Sant Jordi, El Nadal), mental health (Osonament) and refugees/immigrants (Red Cross) in the city. One of the challenges has been the coordination of such a big group of partners. But this growth has allowed us to move from one single beneficiary group in 2017 (people with dementia and Alzheimer's, caregivers and family members) to 4 groups (adding people with mental health, refugees, migrants and people with diverse intellects) and expanded from 25 to 40 free activities in 2023.



Activity developed at the Museum of the Art of Leather, including one musician's performance.



Presentation of the 2024 programme with the city council and representatives from the public and the Third sector.

The methodology has also evolved. It is not only that we visit a museum or art centre and choose 4-5 masterpieces to promote a dialogue about topics we want to discuss (health, well-being, citizenship, loneliness, sense of belonging, etc.). We also invite artists that perform directly for the participants. In this photo, you can see a session developed at the Museum of the Art of Leather, where a famous local violinist/cellist, called Marta Roma, played 3 pieces for the participants. Just beforehand, the group had been discussing the beautiful horse skin chair that appeared near the cellist. It came from the Magic Kings celebration during the '60s. So we used this piece to talk about their memories of Christmas, the special moments with their families, the presents they received, etc. (See previous photo).

For each semester, a leading group composed of the UVic-UCC, the City Council, and representatives from the art/culture and health/social centres design the programme. First, they contact all the art and culture centres within the cities to understand all the potential activities that can be offered. When there is new equipment or art centres, they are added. Then the programme is developed. Some activities have a specific target group (such as people from mental health programmes), whilst others are open to all the different target groups or everyone. All the activities are free for the participants. The programme is promoted by the city council and the participant centres.

The project is funded by the Vic City Council and Barcelona Provincial Government. The project is now in its 5th edition. Here, as UVic-UCC, we plan and coordinate all the activities and develop research to understand the impact of the project.

Research related to the project has been published (Simó Algado et al, 2023). Some of the conclusions have been:

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1. This is an innovative project because it is a city project with a very positive impact on participants.
  2. The project has clear strengths, aspects to improve, and challenges, such as long-term sustainability.
  3. It is perceived as a valid strategy to improve the cognitive well-being of users in areas such as stimulation, attention, and reminiscence.
  4. It is perceived as a valid strategy to improve the emotional well-being of users, enhancing enjoyment, humor, and self-esteem.
  5. It is perceived as a valid strategy to improve the participation and social skills of users, increasing communication with caregivers and family members.
  6. It promotes the creation of an inclusive community from an inclusive culture that breaks stigmas.
  7. It positively impacts the educators, art therapists, occupational therapists, and artists who participated in the project.
  8. It positively impacts the participating cultural entities, such as the CCCB and the UVic-UCC.
  9. Evidence-based research is carried out with a great social contribution to an entire city.
  10. Art and culture are used to encourage verbal and non-verbal communication, which increases social participation and quality of life for people with Alzheimer's and their caregivers.
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## 5. EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF ART AND CULTURE: POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Apart from the promising development of the CCI at the South Mediterranean region, arts action research projects can be implemented to improve mental health well-being, brain health and social participation.

### 5.1. Projects focused on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Countries such as Palestine, or that retain refugee communities, can especially benefit from projects such as the mentioned Campus Vall de Hebrón + MNAC project<sup>10</sup> as it is targeted at women of diverse cultural backgrounds with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to provide therapeutic benefits through the value of art. PTSD is one of the main mental health symptoms in conflict zones. The programmes should target both males and females, from children through to the older population.

### 5.2. Taking care of professionals' health

**Recuperart 19**<sup>11</sup> addressed the consequences of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis on healthcare professionals, whose emotional well-being was greatly affected. This kind of programme can benefit all the countries of CRTEACT4MED, as their health systems were also saturated during the pandemic period and health workers were exhausted and emotionally affected.

### 5.3. Artistic residencies

**Projets as Radiación +++**<sup>12</sup> based on artistic residencies can always be an added value for the host health centres (such as hospitals, etc.). It is a way to improve the well-being of patients and to create employment opportunities for local artists, combatting unemployment that is very high in all countries throughout the region.

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.museunacional.cat/en/community-programmes>

<sup>11</sup> See [https://ics.gencat.cat/ca/Recuperart19/index.html#googtrans\(ca|en\)](https://ics.gencat.cat/ca/Recuperart19/index.html#googtrans(ca|en))

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.poliedrica.cat/es/radiacion/>



## 5.4. Therapeutic storytelling projects

Initiatives aimed to make hospitalisation more pleasant by harnessing the therapeutic power of writing, like **Relato-Hos**<sup>13</sup>, can also be widely implemented. Creative writing is a therapeutic tool for patients during their hospitalisation, being a low-cost intervention.

## 5.5. Projects dealing with violence against women

As violence against women unfortunately is a global problem, any country from CREAT4MED could also benefit from projects as the Atlas del laberinto (Atlas of the Laberint)<sup>14</sup>. Art is a powerful language to promote discussion, reflection and to prevent violence against women.

## 5.6. Projects to promote mental health among children and teens

We can foster this culture of mental health promotion in all the countries mentioned, especially considering that a large part of their populations are young and these are also countries where stigma about mental health has been prevalent. Interventions can be adapted to any school and can incorporate aspects of local culture into the intervention. Likewise, we adapt the artistic languages we use to the age of the participants. With little ones, we can use techniques such as stories; with the older ones we can use techniques more typical of urban art, such as graffiti and rap. So, projects such as the ones developed at **La Sinia, Dominicas and Congost schools** are easily replicable, always adaptable to each country and enriched with local cultural resources.

## 5.7. Art and creativity against mental health stigma

Mental health issues are still a problem in so many countries. Stigma and prejudice are very prevalent in many societies, including South Mediterranean countries. Projects such as **artistic couples**, can be replicated, where we pair a local artist with a person with a certain mental health problem, to work together on an artistic project. They offer artistic opportunities for people with mental health problems that can contribute to their recovery process and mental health well-being, and, at the same time, they combat social stigma against mental illness.

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://bellvitgehospital.cat/en/relathos-project>

<sup>14</sup> See <https://icscampdetarragona.cat/es/el-ics-impulsa-el-taller-atlas-del-laberinto-de-las-violencias-machistas-en-el-museo-de-arte-moderno-de-tarragona/>

## 5.8. Art and creativity to promote mental health

The same typology of the project, as developed at the **Serralves Foundation**, departing from the masterpieces from the local museum and art centres; or using museum pieces to start an open dialogue about mental health and how to improve it, can be very beneficial. It improves the mental health and wellbeing of the participants, helping them in their recovery process at the same time they are dealing with the stigma against mental illness.

## 5.9. Dealing with dementia/Alzheimer's

Although these CREAT4MED countries have a young population (for example, we have seen it at 70% in Morocco), it does not mean they do not have people with **dementia/Alzheimer's** that normally are not properly attended to by the public health services. They may well remain at home, with relatives taking care of them. Projects, such as the one developed with the **CCCB** or with the **Auditorium and National Orchestra**, can be very useful, as they have proved that they improved the well-being and social participation of people with dementia/Alzheimer's. For example, we have seen that Tunisia has an Opera house and more than 376 festivals and concerts.

## 5.10. Creating art and culture-friendly cities

The **Vic Culture and Wellbeing** project can be replicated in any country. The most important thing is to consider the local art and cultural resources and the target populations. In Vic, we started initially with people with **dementia/Alzheimer's** and after that we opened up the project to people with mental health problems and migrants/refugees.

All the countries from CREAT4MED have the opportunity to capitalise on their available cultural resources and infrastructure (as detailed in the previous section), that can be used to implement this kind of project.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

By leveraging the power of arts and culture, communities in the South Mediterranean region can tap into a rich reservoir of resources to support mental well-being. These initiatives not only have the potential to enhance brain health but also contribute to building resilient and vibrant communities where individuals can thrive emotionally, socially and culturally. Through collaborative efforts and informed strategies, we can address the challenges of declining mental health and cultivate environments that nurture holistic well-being for all.

It is worth noting that mental illness should never act as a barrier to accessing culture and engaging in artistic creation. On the contrary, individuals suffering from mental health challenges can greatly benefit from exposure to art and cultural experiences. These experiences can serve as powerful tools for healing, self-expression, and personal growth, providing avenues for individuals to connect with their emotions and thoughts, in meaningful ways. Artistic engagement can offer solace, inspiration, and a sense of purpose to those navigating mental health difficulties, promoting well-being and resilience in the face of adversity. Therefore, promoting inclusive access to cultural and artistic opportunities is not only a matter of equity but also a vital aspect of supporting mental health and fostering creativity within our communities.

Artistic expression, whether through visual arts, music, literature, or performing arts, has proven benefits for mental health, promoting emotional healing, stress reduction and positive self-esteem. By encouraging participation in cultural events, supporting local artists, and integrating arts therapies into healthcare and community programmes, the region can address the negative impacts of trauma and crisis on mental health more effectively.

The key results from this report are:

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1. Importance of addressing mental health issues in ageing societies (both Europe and South Mediterranean region).
  2. Relevance to deal with the stigma associated with mental health issues, developing policies to promote mental health according to the recovery model.
  3. Arts can play a key role in improving mental health well-being, brain health and social participation, as scientific research has already proven.
  4. The cultural infrastructure and exposure to arts varies significantly across the South Mediterranean region.
  5. The case studies from Catalonia provide evidence on the potential role of arts to enhance mental health wellbeing, brain health and social participation.
  6. South Mediterranean countries can capitalise on their rich cultural heritage and artists, in order to enhance mental health wellbeing, brain health and social participation in developing arts projects.
  7. Initiatives like the Catalonia projects can be implemented with the support of international organisations and with the involvement of artists and professionals from European countries.
  8. A Europe and South Mediterranean region dialogue related to the application of arts can be established enriching one another.
  9. Arts projects can be presented and implemented, integrating countries from both sides of the Mediterranean region, improving mental health wellbeing, brain health and social participation.
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Project developed at the CCCB. The first author with some participants entering the centre.  
©Photo by Blanca Miguel

## 7. ACTION PLAN PROPOSAL

### In relation to art and culture projects with the aim of boosting mental health:

1. Identify professionals and politicians from the fields of health, social, arts and culture in the different South-Mediterranean countries interested in being able to develop projects such as those presented in section 5 of this report.
2. Train identified professionals so that they can develop action research projects, based on art and culture, to improve the well-being, brain health and social participation of people with special needs. The target population will depend on the needs of each country. Training can be developed in collaboration with local universities and international partners, like EMEA.
3. Create a network of professionals on both sides of the Mediterranean to exchange knowledge and experiences. It is important to establish a strategic alliance between local universities, the public sector and the private sector.
4. Develop pilot action research projects in each of the CREAT4MED countries, based on the application of art and culture, to improve the well-being, brain health and social participation of people. Research will generate further scientific evidence for the application of art and culture.
5. Replicate and scale in each country the action research projects, based on the application of art and culture. Look for funding opportunities from the public, private and Third sector, both at national and international level.
6. Integrate the projects into the public health and social policies of the different CREAT4MED countries.
7. Present international projects that integrate several countries from both sides of the Mediterranean, to develop action research projects related to the application of art and culture, in order to improve the well-being, brain health and social participation of people with special needs.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Salvador Simó is the deputy director of the chair of Mental Health at the University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC); Director of the Mental Health and Social Innovation research group; Member of the Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association. He has a doctorate in inclusive education, as well as an MBA; Lecturer at the Faculty of Medicine (UVic-UCC), Health Sciences Faculty (UVic-UCC) and at the European Business School; Visiting lecturer and researcher at universities in Canada, Europe, and South America.



His initial training as an occupational therapist has always led him to work, so that all people have access to the same opportunities for art and culture. Thus, in 2017, he led research together with the Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) in the CCCB Alzheimer project, where people with Alzheimer, caregivers and family members participate in activities at the CCCB.

In 2018, he led another investigation, together with the National Auditorium of Catalonia and the National Orchestra, in an action research project to guarantee access to culture for people with Alzheimer's dementia, but also with intellectual diversity. From 2019 to 2022, he participated in an action research project at the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum to also guarantee the access of people with mental health problems to art but, above all, to fight against the stigma present in mental health. This action research was replicated at the Serralves Foundation in Portugal in 2023.

The most notable achievement is the Vic Culture and Wellbeing project, which he has been leading since 2018. This project has made the entire city of Vic arts inclusive for people with dementia problems, mental health problems, of diverse intellects, as well as refugees. This has resulted in an annual programme being created, with more than 40 free activities for these groups.

Likewise, he has worked for both the Barcelona Provincial Council and the Catalonia Government on issues related to art and culture for well-being and social participation. He has co-led close to 10 European projects. He is the author of several books and nearly 100 scientific publications. He works as an international consultant to design and implement action research projects related to all these topics (art, culture, social determinants of mental health and entrepreneurship).

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### EMEA

The Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association, EMEA, is a Barcelona-based regional think-tank that serves as a leading independent and innovative policy research institution; a forum for debate on the political and socio-economic reforms in the Mediterranean and Africa; and a promoter of actions and initiatives that fulfil objectives of sustainability, inclusiveness, regional integration and prosperity.

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CREACT4MED is a project funded by the European Union (EU) through the EuropeAid Programme, that aims to strengthen businesses and entrepreneurship in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) in the Southern Neighbourhood of the EU, with a particular focus on young people and women.