Article

Cultural Policies That Facilitate the Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the Arts: Findings from a Qualitative Multi-National Study

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Abstract: Arts and culture are central to the political struggles of people with disabilities and have the potential to transform how societies relate to disability and to realize the human rights model of disability enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Yet, low levels of participation in arts by people with disabilities are reported in many countries. We also lack research to support policy making that promotes positive measures. This article presents some of the findings from a large qualitative study across 28 European countries addressing factors perceived as facilitative of cultural participation by people representing organizations of people with disabilities. Identifying these factors is a step in supporting the deployment of policies aiming to end the exclusion of people with disabilities from the cultural sphere both as audiences and artists and to realize the human rights model of disability. In particular, findings point to the need to change the knowledge base and ethos of cultural bodies and to reform, amongst other issues, funding mechanisms, governance structures, and consultation processes. We argue that making disability inclusion more intrinsic to cultural policy has the potential to enhance diversity and ultimately to foster the participation of people with disabilities in society more broadly.

Keywords: disability; cultural participation; cultural policies; facilitators; accessibility

1. Introduction

The centrality of arts and culture to the political struggles of people with disabilities has been recognized for some time in disability studies [1]. Arts and media representation, employment, and participation are all known to play a critical role in realizing human rights for people with disabilities [2]. Given that disability art can challenge traditional aesthetics [3], disability activism has been closely associated with disability arts, especially (although not solely) in the UK [4,5]. Disability studies foreground the role of culture in the production and reproduction of inequalities [6,7]. This article builds on that strand of literature but is informed by the human rights model of disability embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ('CRPD' or 'the Convention'), which constitutes disability as resulting 'from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (Preamble, para. 5 and Article 1 CRPD) and places great emphasis on the inherent dignity of persons with disabilities [8,9]. In that regard, it is worth noting that the CRPD has been influenced by disability studies scholarship and activism that took place over decades [10] and that pioneered a social constructionist understanding of disability, which views disability 'as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine' [11] (p. 738) and [12]. Consistent with this scholarship in disability studies, the CRPD has been said to embrace a social-contextual understanding of disability, which represents a more refined version of the UK social model [13,14]. The human rights model of disability 'encompasses both sets of human rights, civil and political

as well as economic, social and cultural rights' [9] (p. 44). Furthermore, Degener suggests that the human rights model values impairments as part of human diversity and pays attention to intersectional discrimination [9] (pp. 47, 49), offering 'room for minority and cultural identification' [8] (p. 9).

For the purpose of this article, it is worth noting that the importance of the right to participate in culture is explicitly recognized by Article 30 CRPD. This provision obliges countries that are parties to the Convention to ensure accessibility of cultural materials, services, activities, and cultural heritage and to take appropriate measures 'to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential'. This right is encompassed by and essential for the realization of the human rights model of disability [15]. This arises from the fact that culture is the expression of human nature and, hence, the recognition of the right to access cultural activities on an equal basis with others is linked to respect for the inherent dignity of persons with disabilities. In addition, cultural representations of disability have historically been limited or negative [16,17] and the disability studies literature on artistic participation by people with disabilities stresses how arts participation can lead to the articulation of identities and experiences that are otherwise overlooked [18–20]. Thus, freedom of creative activity implies the expression of everyone's 'layered' identity and the contribution of artists with disabilities is indispensable to the recognition of the inherent dignity of all people with disabilities.

Notwithstanding the clear obligations laid out in Article 30 CRPD and the importance of cultural participation to the realization of the human rights model of disability, a review of States Parties' reports submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ('CRPD Committee') reveals that countries often fail to adopt a systematic approach to implementing Article 30 CRPD [21]. A series of reports from statistical and policy bodies evidence relatively low levels of participation of people with disabilities and ongoing accessibility issues with infrastructure in a range of cultural sectors and countries (see, amongst others, [22,23]). For example, an Italian report shows widespread exclusion of people with disabilities, with lower levels of participation reported in a variety of cultural opportunities (including cinemas, museums, and archaeological sites) compared to the rest of the population [24]. One survey from the World Blind Union and the American Council of the Blind [25] evidences a lack of audio-description to make visual information of media and arts more accessible. When we turn to address the situation of people with disabilities who are artists or professionals working in the cultural sector, there are less available data, with evidence suggesting that participation rates are particularly low. For example, a study focusing on cultural professionals in the performing arts across Europe found that they lacked the knowledge to support equal access to the cultural sector for audiences, artists, and arts professionals with disabilities, with 31% not seeking new work by artists with disabilities [26]. Even new entrants to cultural industries have been found to display a limited tendency to engage with issues of disability or to advocate for greater diversity [27]. Furthermore, arts programs involving people with disabilities have historically been oriented toward therapeutic outcomes, not artistic ones [28].

Cultural accessibility and inclusive design of cultural services often 'remain[s] an after-thought' [29] (p. 14) and people with disabilities can still be seen as a nuisance and an impediment to the 'normal' functioning of cultural organizations [30]. Dubiel [31] (p. 140) reflects that without official guidance, cultural accessibility is 'created through trial and error' in Poland. While there is research on barriers to cultural participation, studies often limit their focus to people experiencing one impairment type or to a single or a limited number of venues or case studies, see [32–34]. The European Commission has, in recent years, called for a renewed focus on access for people with disabilities as spectators and as artists and creators [35] (p. 15). However, despite the large proportion of the worldwide population that lives with significant disability (16%, or about 1.3 billion individuals) [36], scholarship on public and cultural policies has rarely explored what facilitates broader

cultural participation of persons with disabilities. We also lack research to support policy making that facilitates cultural participation by people with disabilities.

This article presents some of the findings from a large empirical study, which sought, inter alia, to understand what factors operate as facilitators of cultural participation, as perceived by representatives of organizations of people with disabilities across 28 European countries. We focused on participation in creative and arts practices relating to art forms that include literature, dance, music, theatre, and visual arts as well as on cultural heritage. Our study encompassed factors that facilitate both cultural consumption (i.e., enjoyment of other people's creation) and creation (i.e., the possibility for personal expression) [37]. Sixty-four organizations were represented among the participants drawn from organizations of people with disabilities, organizations of Deaf people, and organizations working on disability and arts, and their work related to all disability types. Our study's significance is based on its geographical scope, on the inclusion of different art forms and cultural heritage, and on being informed by people with a wide range of disability types. Furthermore, this study is noteworthy for its potential to inform the design of more inclusive cultural policies and practices. The study is informed by the human rights model of disability and, based on this, this article is situated at the intersection of disability studies, sociology, human rights, and cultural studies. Consistent with such an interdisciplinary approach, this article aims to present findings that advance the scholarly discourse on the cultural participation of persons with disabilities, bringing legal issues together with insights from scholarship from disability studies, including from disability arts and aesthetics. Furthermore, this article aims to contribute by putting forward recommendations that are capable of informing the implementation of Article 30 CRPD.

Further to these introductory remarks, this article is divided into five sections. We first contextualize our study by reference to the literature identifying barriers to and facilitators of cultural participation by people with disabilities. We then outline our methods before, in the next section, presenting findings under four headings. We next discuss our findings and suggest approaches to cultural policy making that arise from them. We end with some concluding remarks. Broadly speaking, we argue for a shift of emphasis in policies and practices pursued to encompass, not just greater accessibility but also a change in the knowledge base and ethos of cultural bodies. The specific areas in which we suggest changes encompass funding mechanisms and governance structures in arts/cultural sectors, meaningful consultation and engagement with organizations of people with disabilities, and changes to professional training and education to integrate people with disabilities.

2. Participation in Culture by People with Disabilities

Studies often address cultural participation of persons with disabilities by way of contribution to positive effects on health, well-being, or social inclusion (see, amongst others, [38–42]). However, within disability studies, the prevalence of merely therapeutic approaches to art and disability has been challenged by scholars (among others, [28]). And, as Solvang [43] (p. 241) argues, for the 'artist struggling for recognition in the cultural field, being perceived as a patient seems like discrimination' even though art therapy itself is not a problem. While appreciating scholarship that does engage with outcomes that are therapeutic, these outcomes are not the focus of this article. Here we argue that making disability issues more intrinsic to cultural policies has the potential not only to enhance the lives of people with disabilities but also to enhance diversity and cultural expression. It also has potential to create more awareness that could, in turn, lead to more opportunities for people with disabilities to attend, create, and contribute to culture and, indeed, to be integrated into society more broadly.

A key starting point for this article is, as mentioned above, that ensuring participation in arts and culture by people with disabilities is a human rights issue and is consistent with, and supportive of, the human rights model of disability enshrined in the CRPD [9]. Disability art has emerged in association with the disability rights movement and is based on legitimizing the experience of people with disabilities 'as equal within art and all other cultural practices' [3] (p. 132). It is characterized as part of a process of representing 'a more

accurate picture of society, life, disability and impairment and art itself' and is a challenge to traditional aesthetic and social values [3] (p. 132). Furthermore, disability aesthetics prize difference as a value in itself, refusing 'to recognize the representation of the healthy body . . . as the sole determination of the aesthetic' [44] (p. 64)]

Notwithstanding this important potential associated with arts participation by people with disabilities, relatively few studies focus on what facilitates cultural participation by people with disabilities both as audiences and as creators or identify how cultural policies should be formulated and implemented to promote this. There is, however, a growing body of literature on barriers to cultural participation, which sometimes posits specific actions that might act as facilitators, often focusing on a single impairment type or on one type of cultural institution [32,45]. For example, studies refer to instances of good physical design of buildings and various approaches to making the content of museums and other cultural venues accessible, including audio-description, touch tours, sign-language interpretation, technologies, and digitization [33,34,46–49]. Other facilitative factors suggested are organizational in nature, including input from stakeholder groups, outreach programs, and training for people working in arts/culture [50–55]. With a view to increasing access both for audiences and for professionals, some additional management changes suggested include the creation of an advisory board with representation of staff and people with disabilities, revising employment practices, and marketing and communication to promote accessible welcoming environments [56,57].

Relative to professional participation, improved approaches to education are central among the facilitative factors put forward, including accessible curricula encompassing disability awareness and support systems (such as practical assistance and information technologies) [20]. The need for artists with disabilities as role models is considered key in several studies [20,58], as are various means of providing support through, for example, mentorship and peer networks [56].

Our study highlights what, in practice, is perceived as facilitative of participation by people representing organizations of people with a broad range of disabilities and how this could be translated into policy design. Thus, our study sought to identify, inter alia, what people representing organizations of people with disabilities, of Deaf people, and of organizations working on arts and disability commonly identify as facilitative of cultural participation; something that enables us to present a broad set of strategies which, we posit, are helpful in formulating policies designed to address issues of arts/cultural participation by people with disabilities. This, in turn, has the potential to challenge traditional cultural and social values and contribute to expressions of greater diversity and to a greater realization of the human rights model of disability. In the next section, we present the methods used.

3. Materials and Methods

We sought to recruit representatives from at least two organizations from 28 European countries (27 EU countries and the UK) drawn from three types of organizations, pursuing a purposeful sampling strategy. The three categories of organizations invited were (1) umbrella organizations of people with disabilities working at the national level who represent people with a range of disability types, (2) nationally representative organizations of Deaf people, and (3) organizations that work specifically in disability and arts/culture. In a few cases, where a national umbrella organization did not agree to participate, we engaged with another organization, such as a national organization of blind people or of people working on independent living. We identified the target organizations through existing contacts, online searches, and, in some cases, through snowball sampling [59]. We prioritized organizations primarily governed by people with disabilities based on the definition in General Comment 7 from the CRPD Committee (CRPD/C/GC/7, para. 11), which states that organizations of persons with disabilities are those 'led, directed and governed by persons with disabilities' and that a 'clear majority of their membership should be recruited among persons with disabilities themselves'.

Qualitative research calls for a flexible research design that evolves in response to context [59]. This was essential in the present study, which involved participants who speak a range of different languages and sometimes require reasonable accommodations to facilitate participation and, because it was carried out from May 2021 to August 2023 and was, therefore, started during the COVID-19 pandemic. This largely ruled out face-to-face interviews and the vast majority of interviews were online. While most participants took part in an interview, we also provided qualitative questionnaires as an alternative that sought open-ended or free-text answers and enabled participants to respond in writing in English or in a language of their choice. Such questionnaires can be combined in a complementary way, with interviews enabling extensive research over a large or geographically dispersed population [60]. While data gathered by written questionnaire can limit the richness of responses, in our case, they also allowed for open-ended responses that contributed to an in-depth study of individual cases, see [61], and the quality of analysis from many of our questionnaires compares compared favorably with our interviewing see [62]. In our case, these decisions were pragmatic to accommodate participants who might otherwise not have been able to participate and allowed for a wider lens than interviews alone would have made possible. As is typical in semi-structured interviews, we developed an interview guide involving a series of open-ended questions and we used it flexibly [63]. The interview guide (and the written questionnaire offered as an alternative) was drafted following an extensive review of the literature [32] and, inter alia, it included questions addressing what factors operate as barriers and facilitators of participation in culture by people with disabilities.

Representatives of 64 organizations participated, comprising 28 organizations of people with disabilities, 25 organizations working on arts and disability, and 11 organizations of Deaf people. They were drawn from 28 countries with at least two organizations participating from each country. The study received approval from the Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee. All participants received information in advance and consented in writing to participate. When we present extracts from participants' contributions, we identify from which country they were drawn, using EU country codes, and the type of organization involved (organization of people with disabilities—'DPO'; organization working on arts and disability—'A&D'; organization of Deaf people—'D').

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and questionnaires were analyzed using a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, a flexible method for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data, involving analytic processes common to most forms of qualitative research [64–66]. Any data type can be analyzed from interviews to qualitative surveys [65,66]. It can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms or can be employed in a manner that is 'unbounded' by theoretical commitments [66] (p. 287). In our case, our approach to analysis was informed by the human rights model of disability embedded in the CRPD, as discussed above.

The steps taken in the analysis of the data followed those outlined by Braun and Clarke [64,66,67]. Following transcription, it involved systematic coding of interesting features and of those that might form the basis of repeated patterns across the dataset. The data relative to each code was then collated. Subsequently, the different codes were sorted into potential themes and all the relevant coded data extracts were collated thereunder. Thus, the process involved familiarization; systematic coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up [64]. We pursued an initial coding process that was open, unstructured, and largely inductive. Afterwards, we developed themes from codes. For the purposes of the present article, the themes presented are based on our identification of how the participants perceived that people with disabilities in their countries were, or could be, facilitated to engage in arts and cultural opportunities encompassing participation as audiences/visitors and as artists, performers, and in other capacities such as arts professionals. Thus, in this article, we present four themes identified that are of key relevance to facilitating cultural participation and to cultural policies—these represent issues that were commonly identified across participants

from different countries, even if some of the participants perceived that their countries were not as advanced as others. Our qualitative approach allows us to present trends and patterns in participants' accounts rather than to present a quantitative analysis.

4. Findings: Facilitators of Cultural Participation by People with Disabilities—A Bottom-Up Approach

Participants across many countries perceived overall improvements in the cultural participation of people with disabilities in recent years or decades, referring to more opportunities to attend theatres, festivals, cinemas and other performances, and heritage/museums, as well as to access books. However, a limitation commonly identified—even by participants who perceived overall improvements—concerned the lack of enforcement of existing non-discrimination or accessibility laws and patchiness in provision in many cases, see [45]. The discussion that follows focuses on which factors and processes were perceived as facilitative and how these could be translated into more inclusive cultural policies. We discuss such facilitators under the following headings: (1) funding schemes incorporating disability criteria, (2) advocacy, awareness-raising, and education, (3) accessibility of cultural infrastructure and content, and (4) consultation with and employment of people with disabilities in cultural sectors.

4.1. Funding Schemes Incorporating Disability Criteria

While participants often highlighted the lack of availability of funding for arts and cultural participation by people with disabilities, which is consistent with research highlighting the unacknowledged costs shouldered by socially engaged arts practitioners [68], there were also perceptions of supportive funding mechanisms. In particular, those incorporating disability criteria were considered supportive of greater cultural participation by people with disabilities, both as audiences and artists. Most notable perhaps were the views of participants from a small number of countries, especially Sweden and the UK, who highlighted the facilitative role played by public funding mechanisms that mandated accessibility for organizations that they fund and otherwise focused on disability arts. For example, a Swedish participant referenced requirements of the Swedish Arts Council that mandate accessibility in funding applications, saying:

> '...*That made a lot of difference. So now everybody, every organisation that applies for money must have a plan for accessibility in every sense. So, when that law passed in 2017 it was also a game changer because otherwise you won't get any money*'. (SE DPO)

Similarly, a UK participant (UK DPO) pointed to funding policies pursued by the Arts Councils in the UK over decades, pointing to how Arts Council England facilitated access and participation by ensuring that 'the organisations that it funds understand the implications of the Equality Act' (UK DPO). He credited these policies with the considerable proportion of audiences for national portfolio organizations that are people with disabilities (UK DPO) (see [69]). A French participant (FR A&D) spoke positively about funding, support, and infrastructure provided for culture in general and highlighted the establishment of arts and disability hubs in regions, which engage in a variety of actions including supporting amateur and professional engagement, although he also pointed out that disability initiatives often relied on project funding (rather than ongoing support).

A few participants, especially those drawn from organizations working on arts and disability, talked about the availability of funding that made their work possible, though sometimes also mentioning challenges, including having to apply for funding from several different sources or only being able to obtain annual project-funding, which limited development over time. Some participants anticipated changes due to more recent policies being pursued by funding bodies. Amongst them, a German participant (DE A&D) pointed to changes amongst funding bodies operating at the State level, which meant that there is more awareness of artists with disabilities adding, however, that this still represents 'small changes'. In common with many other participants, she felt that arts organizations were not well-informed on disability issues, identifying a lack of guidance from funders as a

problem, given that arts organizations 'don't know how to budget for [access]' and 'don't know how to implement it' (DE A&D). This and other participants highlighted facilitative policies mandating outreach or inclusion roles in cultural organizations, especially where the people employed were knowledgeable about disability.

Funding schemes, not drawn from the arts/cultural sector but providing funding that supported employment by people with disabilities in general, including artists and arts professionals with disabilities, were also highlighted as facilitative. These included mobility services and access to work schemes. For example, a scheme available to the actors in a performance company in Finland enabled the company to work with performers living at some distance from venues and, although it created some bureaucratic challenges, it was also valuable and most of the actors with disabilities in the company use it (FI A&D).

Participants also referred to projects specifically in arts/culture funded and/or promoted by the EU, which they often perceived positively in the sense of facilitating cross-country learning, enabling and highlighting work in disability arts, and raising knowledge and capability around accessibility. One example came from Luxembourg, where participants spoke about collaboration on the 2022 Capital of Culture initiative to ensure that events/exhibitions would be accessible. This was perceived as very facilitative of participation and it was hoped that it would have a lasting impact due to greater knowledge on the part of cultural bodies and links made between them and organizations of people with disabilities (LU DPO).

Overall, we posit that funding mechanisms incorporating accessibility and other disability criteria supported by detailed guidelines should be regularly embedded in cultural policies and deserve to be more widely recognized by cultural agencies, governments, and funding bodies.

4.2. Advocacy, Awareness-Raising, and Education

Participants frequently referred to barriers constituted by negative, charitable, or ableist attitudes and lack of knowledge about disability on the part of the general public, including people working in culture, resulting in fewer opportunities to attend cultural events or to create art, see [45]. A very common issue was exclusion from opportunities to train as art professionals based on unquestioned negative assumptions about the capacities of people with disabilities on the part of people making decisions at third level. To counter this, the work of organizations representing people with disabilities was perceived as a significant facilitator, not only of improvements in general for people with disabilities and Deaf people but of reframing cultural perceptions about them and of supporting them in efforts to access and contribute to cultural opportunities, which were often perceived to be improving.

Thus, participants pointed to improvements in the field of culture—like more accessible venues or programs—contributed to by advocacy, support, or actions taken by organizations of people with disabilities or Deaf people and by groups of artists with disabilities—including through direct advocacy or by way of informing or training of staff of cultural organizations. For example, a participant from the Netherlands linked the need for advocacy, awareness raising, and networking by DPOs to the fact that laws were not always enforced ('the legislation part is weak') such that museum and theatre directors, for example, had to be made aware by advocacy of the potential to attract new audiences by making venues more accessible (NL DPO). One UK participant suggested that the social model of disability had proved a great basis for advocacy and change in general (UK DPO). He described the situation now as involving 'greater penetration of mainstream work by disabled artists than we have ever seen before' and pointed to this having resulted from both the availability of funding (discussed above) and from the work of companies of people with disabilities developed over decades (UK DPO). Somewhat similarly, a German participant had witnessed a dramatic increase in the visibility of artists with disabilities attributing this to 'grassroots activity' and to a lot 'people speaking up and saying no we

are not going to put up with ableism anymore' (DE A&D). Like many other participants, she did, however, feel that change was at an early stage.

Specific training targeting people working in culture and within third-level education for arts professionals and the sharing of good practice were also highlighted as facilitative—especially training provided by organizations of people with a diverse range of disabilities. This was in the context of perceptions that there is a lack of knowledge, fear, and prejudice around engaging with people with disabilities among people working in cultural arenas. For example, a Portuguese participant considered training and sharing information as 'very important', contextualizing it as follows:

'... *lack of awareness and knowledge...keeps people away and afraid of dealing with certain new things... and [training] makes them feel more comfortable and conscious of what kind of services they need to provide, what is the best way of providing them, how they can better deal with people. Front-of-house staff, for instance, they are very, very worried of offending, of not receiving [people] properly*'. (PT A&D)

The arena of arts itself—which is intrinsically bound up with expression—was often perceived as one that could create more awareness that could in turn lead to more opportunities for people with disabilities to attend, create, and contribute to culture and to be integrated in society more broadly. Thus, the visibility of arts professionals and artists with disabilities was perceived as facilitative of participation for others, with instances cited of artists becoming role models or influencing amateur groups to think of a professional trajectory for themselves. Among them, a UK participant talked about the motivation she witnessed amongst a group of young people with disabilities having been to a performance by an integrated company of performers, saying the following:

'...*the joy of seeing themselves represented on the stage... It was incredible... that is why disabled people need to see themselves represented. It is so important*'. (UK A&D)

Similarly, a participant from Luxembourg said that it was important to see Deaf people participating, asking 'how else should people get the idea that culture is something they can really participate in?' (LU D). Several participants felt that though the primary aim of their work was artistic, it also constituted advocacy. This is summed up in the statement of a Greek participant that, 'when you are a disabled person, when you are on stage this is an activist act' (EL A&D).

Ultimately, participants considered involvement in the arts as facilitative of change not only in how arts and culture were constituted but in how disability was perceived in society and in opportunities available to people with disabilities to participate in society. Thus, they viewed it as capable of challenging stigma, of being supportive of the dignity of people with disabilities, and of expressions of diversity and, in effect, of supporting the human rights model of disability. In that regard, cultural policies should not only foster contributions by artists with disabilities but also leverage and foster advocacy, as well as engagement with awareness raising and training provided by organizations of people with disabilities.

4.3. Accessibility of Cultural Infrastructure and Content

Participants spoke about access provided to cultural events and opportunities in the sense of both physical access to buildings and access to cultural content (such as exhibitions or performances) something that, while not considered sufficient in itself, was necessary for any participation. Some participants highlighted the lack of a universal or design-for-all approach, which, in their experience, would be helpful not just for people with a range of disabilities but also for older people, for families, and, indeed, for tourists who benefitted from, for example, easy-to-read guides and labels.

4.3.1. Physical Accessibility

Participants referred to laws (and related guidelines) that required physical access to buildings and improvements were perceived especially with regard to physical access

for wheelchair users as audience members. Several participants, notably from the UK, Slovenia, and Luxembourg, were quite positive about improvements in the physical access of audiences to cultural spaces. As a Slovenian participant put it, 'the standard is being raised' (SI DPO). More positively still, a UK participant said: 'I think basic access for audiences in theatres and concert halls and galleries by and large have been pretty well addressed' (UK DPO). More generally, however, positive appraisals tended to relate largely to new buildings, especially those in public ownership in large urban areas.

Furthermore, perceptions of improvements in physical access were not universal. For example, a Bulgarian participant felt that some theatres and libraries had places adapted for wheelchair users, adding, however, that you would have to 'ask about them'. A number of participants talked about improved physical accessibility being attempted but without sufficient knowledge on the part of architects/designers or sufficient input by people with disabilities. They also spoke about access being provided but not always in ways that delivered a good experience—such as separating people with disabilities from their families or friends and/or locating the accessible seating in the front row of a cinema or theatre. Another issue that participants raised was that physical access was prioritized over other kinds of access. For example, a Cypriot participant stated that cultural organizations tended to focus on ramps or on wheelchairs, while, instead, access 'is many, many things' (CY DPO). This reflects how the spectrum of issues that disability as a category involves calls for sustained attention to the 'real complexity of multiple and diverse needs' requiring as much attention to attitudes or ethos as to a set of adaptations [70] (p. 58).

Finally, many participants perceived that less consideration had been given to issues of access for performers and artists with disabilities who continued to be excluded due to inaccessible administration, performance, or backstage areas.

4.3.2. Content Accessibility

Participants often referred to improvements occurring in relation to access to cultural content as audiences and visitors. These views encompassed access measures being provided to a range of types of arts and cultural offerings, which included museum exhibitions (using such measures as tactile models/tours and relaxed visits), film screenings and theatre productions (that include such measures as audio description or sign language interpretation), and libraries (that include audio and digital content).

Thus, several participants referred to opportunities to take part as audiences or consumers becoming more accessible to specific groups such as blind and visually impaired people or Deaf people and suggested that access has increased to the content of cultural bodies like libraries, theatres, and museums. For instance, appraisals relative to libraries were positive on the part of several participants, including an Italian participant (IT DPO) who felt that access to libraries and books was 'very positive'. Likewise, for a Slovakian participant, thousands of Braille books are produced by a library for blind people, while audiobooks and digitization are becoming more popular, adding that the 'situation is slowly but continuously getting better each year' (SK A&D).

Where cinemas were concerned, in a few cases, film screenings of major movies in English were perceived to be accessible for some groups of Deaf people or people with hearing impairments because subtitles were routinely provided in the local language, whereas they sometimes have to arrange their own sign-language interpretation for other screenings and performances.

Various technologies were referenced, such as the growing accessibility of films or museum exhibitions through adaptations for audiences who were blind or visually impaired, Deaf, or hard of hearing. Less common were discussions of technologies that translated sound frequencies into vibrations. But a Luxembourgian city, being a European Capital of Culture in 2022, had involved music performances being made accessible to Deaf people through a vibrating pack with extensive consultation and trialing in advance perceived as central to the success of this initiative (LU D; LU DPO).

While often highlighting positive instances of accessible content, their intermittent nature was also frequently highlighted and most participants felt that there was a lot more that needed to be done. As a participant from Luxembourg said, 'there is still a big gap to make it really accessible for everyone' (LU DPO). And, as a German participant said, while wheelchair access was required in museums that receive public funding, the situation was patchier for people who are blind, Deaf, or with intellectual disabilities: 'it depends on the persons who are responsible for the exhibition' (DE DPO). This perception that accessibility depended on the actions of a particular staff member was a common one. For example, participants from the Netherlands highlighted the work of a staff member in a city museum whose work was perceived to have made a difference in how different groups of people with disabilities could engage, involved building networks with people with disabilities, and was now positively influencing work in other institutions (NL DPO). However, while such actions were viewed positively, the limited nature of their reach was also highlighted and reliance on particular individuals was perceived as 'fragile' with several participants also highlighting how it made a major difference if key allies were in a position to make their interest in inclusion and accessibility central to the work of their organizations.

One fundamental facilitative factor was making sure that the availability of accessible events was known to the target audiences. Easily obtaining information about access to events on websites was valued. In that regard, according to a participant from Sweden, 'websites are accessible now so that is a huge change' (SE DPO). There were also instances of specific programs organized by cultural organizations to facilitate access, involving communication and networking and availability of support at the venue as well as discounted ticketing (ES A&D). While there were positive perceptions such as these, many participants critiqued the quality of the information available about accessibility or referred to difficulties navigating cultural websites as well as obstacles to booking tickets. These issues of trust and communication between cultural organizations and groups of people with disabilities were perceived as particularly important in the context of access being provided only intermittently such that it was not something that people with disabilities could rely on, or would know about, as a matter of course.

4.4. Consultation with and Employment of People with Disabilities in Cultural Sectors

Participants often perceived that a lack of knowledge on disability or accessibility on the part of staff of arts organizations constituted barriers to participation, as mentioned already. At the same time, participants sometimes felt that accessibility was now something of a 'hot topic' amongst cultural organizations (EE DPO) or that people working on culture were more 'willing to hear' and 'to work on it' (NL A&D) and they sometimes linked this to a greater awareness of disability issues that had arisen following enactment of the CRPD. For example, a representative from Luxembourg felt that the CRPD had brought 'movement' in the area of culture, suggesting that, as a result, 'more and more artists and institutions implement inclusion or at least more accessibility' in their programs (LU D). Against that backdrop, key facilitators of access and engagement, both for audiences/visitors and for development as artists, were where the staff of cultural organizations had become knowledgeable about disability and/or where artists/professionals with disabilities were employed.

Especially where audiences are concerned, a key facilitator was where arts organizations consulted in meaningful ways with organizations that could advise them about the diverse accommodations needed and link them with different groups of people with disabilities. A few participants pointed to processes of meaningful engagement that could involve providing education and training (as discussed above) or could involve organizations of people with disabilities playing a facilitative role as consultants and informants about good practices as to accessibility. It could also involve engaging in networking or joint work. For example, one participant, talking about creating joint work with mainstream cultural bodies, said: 'You have to connect, you have to get to know each other' (NL A&D). This, she felt, led to more knowledge about disability and more hiring/casting of artists

with disabilities. A participant from Estonia described a consultative process engaged in within the museum sector as follows:

> '[There are] some good examples about museums that focus on the topic of accessibility …. They have gathered the experts from these organisations [of people with disabilities] together in the start of the process they have thought out how the exhibition, how the rooms in the museums are built up also…. And together they have made these exhibitions, thought out how is the most accessible way to build them up, to set them up in the rooms. And the final outcome has been quite fantastic and has met the needs in the terms of accessibility'. (EE DPO)

He also suggested that processes could be improved by introducing auditing for compliance and that a national-level expert group that arts/cultural organizations could consult with for practical guidance would be key facilitators of change (EE DPO).

In addition, participants sometimes pointed to the need for mainstream arts organizations to be made aware of the availability of performers with disabilities and there were some examples of registers or lists being created that promoted knowledge of them. More generally, the employment of professionals with disabilities was perceived to engender trust amongst people with disabilities, to change access fundamentally, and to have the potential for the integration of a consciousness of disability across different areas of culture. For example, an Irish participant talked about being engaged to facilitate tours by an art gallery, which, because she is a person with a disability, she suggested attracted audiences with disabilities: 'And that brought in audiences, people who had never been to the gallery before…', adding that 'Otherwise you will not establish any sense of trust or sustained relationship or anything of worth artistically' (IE A&D 2). Somewhat similarly, a German participant (DE A&D) highlighted the change to a festival that focused on disability arts once it was led by a Director with disabilities: 'it made a massive difference. There were also two disabled curators organising the symposium for the festival and …. there were more and more smaller projects popping up' (DE A&D).

Also, concerning employment but relative to libraries, a Bulgarian participant discussed a library where people with disabilities were employed and which consequently provided a service that 'accounts for differences' and attracted visitors that not only included people with disabilities but also others. She broadened out from this example to say:

> 'Having disabled people on the staff in such places like libraries or cultural clubs or movie theatres—that makes a difference. And that makes a difference in service, in accessibility and in attracting clients including disabled clients'. (BG DPO)

However, this participant also perceived that the employment of people with disabilities in cultural organizations was extremely rare and that it depended on the knowledge/interest of decision-makers. Thus, the employment of artists and professionals could depend on the interest/enthusiasm of key staff as allies. For example, a Spanish participant was amongst those highlighting the impact of a few theatre and cinema directors who have come to routinely cast people with disabilities even when disability is not the focus of the work (ES A&D). A Portuguese participant (PT A&D) discussed similar processes, suggesting that, crucial to arriving at this point was the involvement of staff who have been working on these issues for decades, including an Artistic Director, 'who made a choice—otherwise it wouldn't be this kind of production with these specific conditions' (PT A&D).

The employment of people with disabilities as artists/performers could also be considered critical to the quality of a performance, with a participant from Germany referring to a film appearing 'more authentic' because it was made collaboratively and with Deaf actors: 'the topic of Deaf culture and sign language would be treated and described properly' (DE D). That being said, as important as these examples were, the context for them was one where they were generally not the norm, as that participant also said: 'In the theatre and film sector, the fight continues' (DE D).

Overall, the discussion in this section suggests the need for cultural policies to promote greater integration of disability issues within cultural bodies and actions to promote greater employment of artists and professionals with disabilities.

5. Discussion

The interlinked facilitators identified in our analysis contribute to scholarship by outlining factors that were perceived as facilitative in the practice of cultural participation by people with disabilities, both as audience and as creators of art and as arts professionals. This section further discusses how these facilitators should be embedded within cultural policies. While there were many perceptions of the scarcity of funding for cultural participation by people with disabilities, facilitative funding mechanisms were also identified—ones that promote equality by mandating accessibility on the part of funded organizations, that promote knowledge and skills around anti-discrimination measures, and that involve support for roles in inclusion/outreach. It is evident that these criteria should be embedded more consistently into all national and EU funding mechanisms.

The empirical findings discussed in this article outline how study participants often perceived that opportunities for cultural participation were increasing and that access was improving especially for audiences but pointed to a patchiness in the opportunities available (particularly as regards access to cultural content), to limited or no improvements in many countries relative to the employment of people with disabilities as artists and arts professionals, and to very limited opportunities for professional education and training within the arts/cultural sector for people with disabilities. Positive developments were sometimes linked to a greater awareness of disability issues that had arisen due to the CRPD (albeit often in a rather patchy manner). Sometimes, opportunities—especially to access cultural content like exhibitions and performances—were highlighted as due to the interest of a key ally within a cultural organization. This could make a difference, especially if those allies were in positions to influence practices pursued at an organizational level but it could also mean that improvements were vulnerable to change in personnel. Alongside this, perceptions of negative attitudes and lack of knowledge on the part of people working in culture continued. These were thought to be challenged and sometimes transformed by activism and by organizations of people with disabilities engaging in collaboration, networking, training, and education with the staff of cultural bodies and within third-level colleges. Meaningful consultation and collaboration were also key to making the accessibility of these events known to people with disabilities and trusted by them.

Participants often considered that the expression and visibility intrinsic to creation in the arts by people with disabilities was facilitative of change in how arts and culture were constituted and also in how disability was perceived in societies and, ultimately, in how laws and policies would be implemented, pointing to the importance of having people with disabilities becoming visible and prominent as artists/performers and to the employment of professionals with disabilities at all levels, including in decision making roles. That the employment of artists/performers with disabilities had increased within mainstream arts organizations was not a universal perception but was perceived by several participants, although, again, this could depend (especially in its initial stages) on the interest of a key ally in a position to make this happen. As the former Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Devandas-Aguilar, argues, neither awareness-raising programs nor the generalization of anti-discrimination measures alone will suffice for disability to be embraced as part of human diversity and a cultural transformation is needed in how society relates to the difference of disability [71]. The findings discussed shed light on this statement showing that promoting cultural participation is important to communicate understandings of the common humanity shared by all people, and has an important role to play in realizing a human rights approach to disability. It also suggests some key steps that can be taken, as perceived by study participants, to facilitate greater arts participation by people with disabilities—both as audience/visitors and as creators, artists, and cultural

professionals—and thereby to implement Article 30 CRPD, which can, in turn, contribute to the realization of the human rights model of disability.

Our findings highlight areas in which rigorous and systematic implementation at various levels is capable of facilitating this for people with disabilities. These include addressing infrastructural and cultural content issues but, crucially, measures taken need to take account of a large number of complex issues involving the interplay between individual characteristics and various arts/cultural environments [72]. Something that underlies most or all of the facilitative factors identified is the usefulness of addressing attitudinal issues amongst people working in culture. This is consistent with what has long been argued by scholars in disability studies that disablement can be experienced as the outcome of the withholding of social and cultural recognition [73]. This is also consistent with arguments that prevailing understandings of disability amongst people working in culture are medicalized and that this remains hard to shift and is associated with unquestioned assumptions or projections about the lives of people with disabilities [2]. This acts as a barrier to productive working partnerships 'no matter the access infrastructure in the institution' [2] (p. 218) and requires an approach that goes beyond access and involves a change in ethos [70]. Thus, crucial here, are education, training, and sharing of good practice as well as what might be considered social measures including facilitating networking and greater engagement with organizations of people with a wide range of disability types and/or arts and disability organizations. The quality of any training and consultation engaged in is important, with tokenistic approaches being unlikely to have much impact and structured meaningful contact being the most useful [74]. Linked to this is the need for greater employment of people with disabilities and this highlights the role that can be played by key allies in initiating this. In short, this requires that cultural policies move beyond access measures, which are necessary but insufficient in themselves, and that a more disability-informed and integrated ethos should become an aim of policy measures. This should be informed by meaningful consultation with people with disabilities and input by them not only in framing policies but also in the design of buildings and programs and in monitoring and implementation, something also recommended in other studies (amongst others [55,57,75]). It also implies the efficacy of support for organizations of people with disabilities and organizations of disabled artists engaging in advocacy to influence the ideas, beliefs, and values that influence policy processes [76].

Based on our findings, we suggest that funding bodies mandate accessibility for organizations that they fund, taking account of costs associated with accessibility, supporting this with guidelines, and requiring recruitment, planning, implementation, communications, and monitoring measures informed by people with disabilities to include meaningful processes of training and other input into programs and to encourage employment of people with disabilities. Thus the findings of this study support more inclusive practices in the form of inclusion of people with disabilities in arts–cultural bodies. It would be also important to designate a hub (at national or regional levels) that can operate as a knowledge and networking center, linking funding bodies and cultural bodies with training and expertise from people with disabilities and promoting knowledge about artists with disabilities and Deaf artists and about access issues. Finally, more needs to be done to ensure that third-level education on arts and culture is accessible and fosters a culture of inclusion, which requires changes to the curriculum, accessibility measures, and training for staff and students delivered by people with different types of disabilities.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that cultural policies should encompass stronger and more comprehensive access measures but also aim to cultivate a more informed and integrated ethos on disability issues amongst cultural actors and to embed a more systematic approach that includes both audiences and artists with disabilities. We have also highlighted the need for organizations of people with disabilities to engage in advocacy to influence attitudes and values as well as policy processes.

Most fundamentally, we argue that implementing the facilitators identified in this article has the potential to enhance the lives of people with disabilities, to inform the implementation of Article 30 CRPD, and to support the realization of a human rights model of disability embedded in the CRPD not least by enhancing diversity and cultural expression and by giving prominence to expressions of the voices, experiences, and distinct cultural or linguistic identities of people with disabilities and Deaf people.

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