

# **Public Cultural Institutions in Mexico and Precarization of Creative Labour**

## **Abstract**

The Mexican state has been an active agent in the construction of cultural institutions and infrastructure for more than a century. But the symbolic and political currency of the cultural sector is not reflected in stable conditions for creative workers who exist precariously. In this article, we explore a manifestation of the simultaneous state of prominence and precarity on procurement regimes implemented by federal government agencies before the COVID19 crisis, and support programs from the federal and local government of Mexico City to employ creative workers during the early phases of the pandemic. We examine the contents and arguments used by these programs to highlight how cultural policies and institutional structures developed by the government are a continuation, and even a deepening, of the already-precarious work opportunities for the cultural sector. Through policy analysis and qualitative interviews, we contrast the officially stated goals of government institutions, against the lived experiences of creative workers.

Keywords: Creative labour, creative workers, artistic communities, precarization, cultural policy, public institutions.

## **Introduction**

The Mexican state has been an active agent in the construction of cultural sector institutions and infrastructure for more than a century, as cultural projects have been deployed to build national identity and legitimise political regimes. But the symbolic and political currency of the cultural sector is not reflected in stable conditions for creative workers. Creative workers and their endeavours exist precariously, as their income, legal and socio-economic working conditions are far from ideal, whether they are working in private or public institutions. In this article, we explore one manifestation of this simultaneous state of prominence and precarity with a focus on exemplary procurement regimes from the federal and local government of Mexico City to employ creative workers during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing policies were first established.

In previous research, we have seen how creative workers in Mexico developed strategies to consume and work during the pandemic (Authors, 2022a). We examined how the creative sector

has been reshaped by changing labour practices during the pandemic (Authors, 2022b) and how socioeconomic conditions created by the pandemic have intensified the precarious financial conditions of creative workers (Authors, 2022c). After having explored the social action of creative sector professionals from both individual and collective perspectives, we realised that paying attention to government policies was also essential. Therefore, in this article we examine the responses of the Mexican government and Mexican cultural institutions to the pandemic crisis. Institutional responses are an essential element in any comprehensive explanation of what the pandemic crisis has signified for people's lives, they're also especially important in the lives of creative workers, for whom government policy determines so much about their working conditions, their family wellbeing, their careers, and the very possibility for them to keep doing creative work.

In comparison to other countries with stronger economies, where governments implemented policies and furlough schemes that offered financial support to businesses or independent professionals across all productive sectors unable to work during the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, the efforts of Mexican government agencies were limited. Rather than a comprehensive strategy, there were varied isolated efforts by different federal and local institutions to buffer the effects of the crisis, responding to different demands and at times serving political agendas. The limitations of such piecemeal support from the state were acutely felt by workers in Mexico's creative sector.

This article focuses on analysing four specific initiatives developed by different government agencies in Mexico City to employ creative workers prior to the pandemic and during the unexpected context of social distancing and pandemic. We discuss the type of relationship the government has had, since before the pandemic, with creative workers through the example of Chapter 3000 as a procurement regime, and through a 2021 public call to illustrate textbooks. Then, we also discuss two further strategies that came to exist during the social isolation period of 2020<sup>2</sup> to support creative workers. These four strategies that show a particular relationship were

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<sup>1</sup> To investigate different schemes in the EU and Latin America, see: Hancké, B., Van Overbeke, T., & Voss, D. (2022). Crisis and Complementarities: A Comparative Political Economy of Economic Policies after COVID-19. *Perspectives on Politics*, 20(2), 474-489. doi:10.1017/S1537592721001055 and Beccaria, L., Bertranou, F. & Maurizio, R. (2022), COVID-19 in Latin America: The effects of an unprecedented crisis on employment and income. *International Labour Review*, 161: 83-105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12361>

<sup>2</sup> Officially, Mexico's social isolation happened between March 23rd, 2020, and July 2020 when the "new normal" started. However, social distancing strongly prevailed across educational, cultural, and governmental sectors until March 2022

selected through fieldwork findings with creative workers interviewed in our research, and the importance of said strategies in their narratives. Our research participants had experienced these government initiatives personally, and their conversations indicated a good understanding of the conditions in which these had been created, and how they worked. They also highlight how cultural policies and institutional structures developed by government were a continuation, and even a deepening of the already-precarious ways in which Mexican governments have shaped work opportunities for the cultural sector.

Through policy analysis and qualitative interviews, we contrast the officially stated goals of government institutions according to their documents, against the lived experiences of creative workers, before and during the pandemic. We establish some general social conditions that characterise creative and cultural sectors prior to the pandemic, to then analyse the reactions from different governmental actors to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In the final section of the paper, we interpret participants' individual experiences in facing these government actions to conclude with some thoughts about the ongoing problematic nature of conditions for the creative workers; concerningly, these conditions do not seem to be heading towards improvement. On the contrary, the experiences of creative workers in the years following our fieldwork suggest a process of increasing precarization.

### **Navigating cultural research in pandemic times: context and methodology**

For the purpose of this article, we identify the creative sector as that economic group whose capital activities are based in design, production, sale and exchange of goods and services that are related to the use of imagination, intellectual property, and development of technology. (United Nations 2021). Creative sectors include advertising and marketing, architecture, arts and design, crafts, fashion and textiles, film, television and radio, music and performing arts, publishing, software and video games, visual arts including photography, painting and sculpture. (United Nations 2021). In analysing work and life conditions of workers whose main activity is based in creativity, we follow existing research that understands cultural, creative, and artistic careers as forms of labour (Belfiore, 2022; Pinochet et al., 2021).

Professions based in creativity have long experienced difficulty in having worker's efforts considered as labour, and creative workers still face many issues around contractual relationships,

payment schemes, access to social security. There is considerable existing research from diverse global contexts, including in Africa (Joffe, 2021, Langevang et. al. 2022), Latin America (Author, 2022c; Guadarrama et al., 2021, Pinochet, et al., 2021) and Europe (Comunian and England, 2020), showing how the economic promises of the creative industries were failing even before the pandemic began. Creative work, understood as non-traditional work, tends to be the subject of precarized labour conditions. There is extensive work that explains which economic, political, and social factors set the conditions for certain types of jobs that have worse labour conditions than others (Menger, 2014), but we focus on the policies that facilitate precarization's processes. Creative work has formed through a complex process that includes historical, cultural, and economic models that have disdained creative work and legitimated institutional models of labour conditions that threaten development, professional growth and welfare.

We contend that many government institutions, through cultural policy, contractual terms and conditions, and with their responsibility to create conditions for art and culture to develop, are failing their legal and ethical base to protect creative workers' rights through their own statements. Instead, cultural policy is playing an important role to reproduce a neoliberal program where flexibilization of labour relations is not merely one strategy, but has become the norm, affecting workers' rights, wellbeing, mindsets, and life conditions. Although precarity is a concept that is being criticised for losing its political efficacy (as discussed in the introduction to this special issue), it also has become an element that shapes the identity of workers. From this perspective the explicative importance that precarity holds as a concept is that through its use, workers acknowledge their working conditions as problematic, rather than standard, and identify with it demanding to change.

Precarity has been making its way through other professions and their labour market where labour rights existed before but are increasingly disappearing. For example, the state's oil company in Mexico (Bensunsán & Middlebrook, 2013; De la Garza, 2012; Rubio, 2017) or the academic market (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Rondero, 2008; Lloyd, 2018) are two sectors where private increased investment, structural reforms, and the dissolution of unions have changed working conditions, positions and careers because of flexibilization and tertiarization of labour, just as what happens for the creative sector. In spite of the precarity of their labour market, creative workers are not opting out, although precarization is not a concept that can explain the reasons and motivations these individuals have to keep doing their jobs and somehow making a living, for the

purpose of this paper it is still a comprehensive approach that helps to understand different levels of institutional commitment to procure jobs and good working conditions and how the workers explain their own experience about it.

We understand cultural policy as a way for governments to consolidate a cultural project (or to maintain the absence of one), by regulating and promoting the production, management, and distribution of cultural assets. We adopt a cultural policy definition that emphasises the role of government actions in articulating agents that promote art and culture as part of their political programs (Nivón, 2006; Ejea, 2009). We are aware of many other definitions for cultural policy that also consider the action and tensions from other political actors such as collectives, private sectors, and the creative workers themselves (Wortman, 2017; Pinochet et al, 2021; Nivón, 2006). However, this article focuses on the analysis of government actions towards creative workers as a response to the pandemic crisis, while acknowledging that even before the crisis creative labour underwent precarization processes that were shaped by limited government actions, for at least two decades.

The research that resulted in this article was an unexpected detour from a larger collaborative ethnographic research project exploring consumer practices in the Global South; as for many other cultural researchers with grand plans in 2020, our research had to change.<sup>3</sup> With a newly designed digital interview focus, we faced undertaking our research in a new reality. Our unforeseen research context led us to witness and describe how workers in Mexico's creative sector sought to make a living in the worst scenario possible: a scenario in which every form of creative expressions based on human interaction was cancelled, and every face-to-face activity was shut down. As a result, we were able to explore and discuss their individual and collective responses to the crisis through different frameworks that explain these processes using concepts like precarization, social ties, and survival strategies. One of the most visible consequences of the pandemic has been to expose how resilient and resourceful the creative sector is (Fediuk and Herrera 2021, Quiña et.al. 2020, Guadarrama et. al. 2021, Langevang et. al. 2022).

Mexico is a country where creative workers have long been making an important contribution to the economy. By 2019, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, this sector contributed 3.1% of the country's gross national income (INEGI, 2022). A

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<sup>3</sup> This paper comes from a comparative research project entitled *New Consumer Cultures in the Global South* funded by the Australian Research Council project #DP190100727. The project is coordinated by University of Technology Sydney in Australia, and the research team studying Mexico City was coordinated by Universidad Veracruzana.

rich body of research uses various approaches to describe the Mexican creative sectors, with research momentum around creative economics and cultural industries as frameworks that have made an impact on the Latin American region. Piedras (2004) was an early contributor who has shown the increasing contribution of the copyright industries to the national economy. This was soon followed by García Canclini and Piedras (2006), whose work was among the first to enunciate how, in addition to identity formation and community bonding, culture can create wealth. Reyes (2016), claims that considering culture as a resource is changing the way we define creative work, and makes problematic the relationship between making art and making a living from art. These works have interesting approaches that contribute to a dynamic discussion of Mexico's creative sectors. However, much of this work has chosen a quantitative path and has considered the sector as blocks of enterprises and sometimes of collectives too, where the human scale tends to be lost.

We sought a qualitative path. Our approach began with learning about individual experiences and their meanings, the way participants live, but also the strategies they build to face financial uncertainty and other features that characterise their creative work. It was from the stories of creative workers' individual experiences that we learned about their work conditions before the pandemic, about some government resources they have had access to, as well as other new strategies or resources they had heard about. They explained what they knew about cultural policy programs, and how useful these programs were. These participant experiences helped us to establish a general image of what it has been like to be a creative worker in Mexico under such unusual circumstances.

Through their narratives, we found frequent mentions of policies and programs that our interviewees have been associated with in different ways and moments of their careers, some of them are specific responses to the pandemic. These include two examples of strategies to hire creative work and two programs settled to face the COVID19 crisis.

- Chapter 3000. A procurement regime from government offices that offers only a salary and no other benefits.
- *Convocatoria CONALITEG*<sup>4</sup> Since its creation in 1959, the committee has made a public call to create and illustrate the basic education textbooks in exchange of

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<sup>4</sup> CONALITEG (Comisión Nacional de Libros Gratuitos) is the Mexican government agency responsible for the production, distribution, and updating of textbooks for basic education levels, including preschool, primary, and

payment for the work, but the 2021 modified their terms, and instead of paying for the editing services, it offered the recognition of “an acknowledgement”.

- *Contigo en la distancia*. A program promoted by the *Secretaría de Cultura* in 2020 as response to the pandemic, as “a permanent invitation to the artists and the community to keep creating and using their talents and creativity to transit the contingency”.<sup>5</sup> All the dependent organs, organisms and endowments showcased their activities in a virtual space where their cultural and artistic activities during the lockdown.
- *Convocatoria para creadores y artistas. Contingencia COVID-19*. A time-limited call from the federal *Secretaría de Cultura* to financially support artists and creators by making one-time funds transfer and to upload the material in the *Contigo en la distancia* platform. The explicit purpose was “to encourage the community and guarantee that society has access to quality products and content”.<sup>6</sup>

As part of our broader study, which had a total of 30 participants, we interviewed 15 workers, ages 23 to 53, both male and female, whose creative work have been their main economic activities and income. This group of participants include disciplines in the visual arts, communication, publishing and editorial; and performing arts like dance and music, which gave us a broad image of creative work. We note that the crisis experience was different for each one of them, for individual reasons, and because of differing natures of their disciplines.

Following the premise of the research project from which our data was derived, these workers’ living conditions fell in between definitions of urban poverty and established middle classes. We came to notice that most of the creative workers interviewed were living in precarious economic conditions, which we understood as a “lack of minimal socioeconomic conditions, that could guarantee a dignify life of the workers and their families” (Bolffy 2015, in Martínez et al., 2019). Although these conditions are mainly set by the market, different levels of government are

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secondary education, these are of free national distribution to the totality of schools. Cfr. <https://libros.conaliteg.gob.mx/>

<sup>5</sup> Contigo en la distancia (With you in distance), see <https://www.gob.mx/cultura/prensa/contigo-en-la-distancia-desde-la-secretaria-de-cultura?state=published>.

<sup>6</sup> Call for creators and artists. Contingency COVID-19, see <https://contigoenladistancia.cultura.gob.mx/assets/uploads/blog/convocatoria-celd.pdf>

indirectly involved in shaping the circumstances for creative work. Government institutions design and implement cultural policy at both national and local levels, and public institutions are the major employers for the creative sector. The creative workers in our study experience the effects of public strategies, resources, and policy in full effect due to their lack of stable jobs, access to a specialised network, or a solid financial safety net that could back up their creative motivations when financial crises hit their daily lives.

For each of the 15 participants, our main approach was a virtual interview which ranged between 50 and 120 minutes long, with an average of 90 minutes per interview. After the interviews, we kept communicating via text message, email or through their social media profiles. As part of our methodological strategy amended due to COVID-19 lockdowns, we also exchanged visual content such as photos and videos from the participants, which we asked them to share with us to help document their descriptions about socioeconomic context and consumption habits.

### **Creative work in Mexico City: life before the pandemic**

As the capital of Mexico, with 56 municipalities and more than 21 million inhabitants (INEGI, 2020), Mexico City is among the largest cities in the Latin American region. There is a long history of concentrating infrastructure and cultural and artistic facilities in the capital, and as a consequence, this megalopolis hosts the most vibrant and diverse cultural scene of the country. Such a vibrancy is the result of a political project set up after the Mexican Revolutionary period, in which arts and culture took an important and transformative role. The result is an indissoluble connection of the arts with government: as Azuela has noted, “ever since the 1910 Revolution, the relation between art and State has been a constitutive part of the institutional structure and worldview of political, artistic and intellectual groups” (Azuela, 2013, 329). A large proportion of federal and local cultural policies implemented throughout the 20th century were orchestrated to create strong national identities, making use of the cultural expressions of diverse regions.

Mexico City concentrates most of the nation’s creative employment options, the main cultural institutions, the private cultural spaces, and the most important public media outlets.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For example, there are 141 museums in Mexico City (INEGI, 2020b). The nation’s most important art schools are found in the city, as well as numerous significant theatres, concert halls, and galleries. Also located in Mexico City are the central authorities of essential governmental bodies: these include the Secretary of Culture and the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature (INBAL); agencies like National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) for safekeeping material heritage, and National Instituto of Indigenous Nations (INPI) for preserving indigenous



When brought together, such a centralization offers an array of possible employment sources for creative activities. However, such multiplicity of options does not always lead to permanent positions, stable incomes, or fair remuneration.

Mexican government institutions have taken a particular approach to dealing contractually with temporary workers, following global neoliberal trends in economic policy making. The General Law of Government Accountability, launched in 2008, is based on public accountancy management in which institutional budget is classified in chapters (DOF, 2010). Chapter 3000 refers to the budget assigned to hire general services from external workers: it governs the institutional use of the budget, but it also manifests as a procurement regime that frees the institutions from offering a stable contract and lawful working conditions which would allow for the development of a career, social security, or any kind of responsibility taken by the institutions for the worker.

Chapter 3000 has become a frequent procurement regime for the government institutions that manage arts and culture. This includes institutions that oversee artistic and cultural production, distribution, and conservation. In the Secretary of Culture by the last quarter of 2022 just under 50% of their job positions were full-time contracts, often unionised and with access to social security and lawful benefits. The other 50% comprise a variety of contracts such as at-will, fixed term, and freelance contracts, including those hired under the Chapter 3000 scheme (Plataforma Nacional de Transparencia 2022). This process of flexibilization of labour relations absolves the hiring institution of the responsibility for providing healthcare services and any other benefits to approximately half of their workforce. As a result of procurement regimes such as Chapter 3000, many creative workers live with ongoing uncertainty.

Such situations occur not only under Chapter 3000, but also for other procurement regimes. Another example of working conditions for creative workers is the CONALITEG public call for the illustration of textbooks. This call has operated for some time in the form of temporary job commissions. Well before the crisis in our period of research, CONALITEG would launch the call for artists, photographers, illustrators, graphic designers, and other visual artists, choose the

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cultures and languages; cultural media outlets such as *Radio Educación*, *Opus 94*, and *Canal 22*, the National Film Library, and many others. These outlets for national cultural production are leading spaces of employment for the creative sector.

applicants, and pay for a stock of illustrations that the creative workers would produce during an agreed period. The temporary nature of their work is consolidated and legally enshrined, without pay during holidays or budget negotiation periods, which usually span the first quarter of the year:

“Usually, publishing work starts in May and goes through December, and then from January to May there’s nothing, at least here in Mexico, it’s a lost period. So, I work hard and save enough in case I don’t get any other job at the beginning of the year, then I would live out of my savings” (Carolina, 31 March 2021).

According to their narratives, before the pandemic, interviewees had already found themselves in such working conditions that could be labelled as precarious, even when most of them have worked in some way for public institutions for years and continued to do so. The monthly income for many of them was between \$550 and \$690 USD, and their sources of income were mostly informal and unstable. Most of them lived in rented, shared housing, with people forgoing medical insurance and lacking retirement savings, but also reporting only scarce participation in welfare social programs from the government.<sup>8</sup> Creative workers already experienced a status of undertaking work that was precarious by design and implementation, yet not accessing the networks of government support created for those designated marginalised and vulnerable.

### **Cultural policies of the AMLO federal government**

In 2018, Mexicans elected their first federal government and President from the Left. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, and the Morena Party, took office with great expectations for important changes to the national policies, including cultural policies. Among López Obrador’s main guiding commitments were eliminating corruption within public administration, promoting transparency, redistributing national resources with more inclusion and a commitment to social justice (Presidencia de la República, 2019). For cultural matters, the *Programa Sectorial de Cultura* is a federal policy that establishes that culture is a human right that must be protected and fulfilled. Furthermore, cultural policies must be inclusive, in keeping with the federal policy of “no one left behind, no one left out”<sup>9</sup>. The state must guarantee access to

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<sup>8</sup> Here we refer to the social benefits that are possible to obtain by the general population, support for students, single mothers, elderly, disabled, and other vulnerable groups.

<sup>9</sup> “No one left behind, No one left out” is one of the guiding principles of the current government as stated in the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo and has become a statement in different speeches from all the government institutions. For some examples cfr. Plan Nacional de Desarrollo:

culture to all in an egalitarian manner, prioritising historically excluded groups, and bringing cultural diversity to the public sphere. In terms of creative production, the policy emphasises the right to creation, as well as the right to guarantee financial and other incentives to promote creative freedom. In theory, Mexican creative workers of all disciplines deserve to access production, exhibition, and distribution channels for their artistic production in a democratic way (Secretaría de Cultura, 2020).

However, before long, things started to move in a different direction through a concurrent federal policy of Republican Austerity, which aimed to “battle social inequality, corruption, avarice and the squandering of the national goods and resources, administering the resources with efficiency, efficacy, economy, transparency, honesty to satisfy the aims for which these are designated/assigned” (Cámara de Diputados, Ley Federal de Austeridad Republicana, Art. 4.I, p.2, 2019). A measure derived from the narrative of fighting corruption and promoting transparency was that in April 2020, some endowments were dissolved or relocated (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020). These endowments had been passed on from neoliberal-influenced previous governments that reconfigured State institutions including arts and culture under a liberalisation discourse of resources distribution through grants, scholarships, and internships. They were subject to discussion because of their inability to achieve the ending of discretionary practices to regulate and dispense resources and budgets (Ejea, 2009). Following this line of criticism, the new administration began their strategy by requiring their management and distribution to return to the Treasury. Early responses to this decision from the creative sector were negative because of rising concerns about the possible disappearance of funds, but the government announced the opposite by keeping several endowments and restructuring their administration, such as FONCA, FOPROCINE<sup>10</sup> and *Mandato Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso*.<sup>11</sup>

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[https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=5565599&fecha=12/07/2019#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5565599&fecha=12/07/2019#gsc.tab=0); Programa Sectorial de Educación and Programa Sectorial de Cultura <http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/sectoriales.php#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>10</sup> FONCA (Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes) and FOPROCINE (Fondo para la Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad), are Mexican government agencies that provide funding, grants, scholarships, and other resources to support the creation, production, and dissemination of Mexican performing arts and cinematographic works.

<sup>11</sup> Mandato Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso is a specific type of endowment that receives resources by the federal Secretaría de Cultura, the local Secretaría de Cultura de la Ciudad de México and the National Autonomous University of Mexico to support the work of Colegio de San Ildefonso as a museum and cultural centre.

For Chapter 3000 workers, the austerity policy meant a tangible reduction in hiring resources, so there was a wave of contract terminations as soon as the policy was implemented, and even more cases of workers who continued doing their jobs but without getting paid. Working without pay is a trend and it has been publicly documented since March 2018 when a group of workers at INBAL went public to protest the lack of remuneration for their work (Excelsior, 01 March 2018). Protests continued during the following years and throughout 2021, as cultural policies and implementation of budgets were still not resolving important issues like working conditions for creative workers.

In similar circumstances, CONALITEG changed the terms of its public call for the illustration of textbooks in 2021, cancelling economic remuneration and offering instead a certificate of participation and an author credit in the book of publication, effectively requiring free labour:<sup>12</sup>

“When we reviewed the call of the SEP<sup>13</sup> we panicked. Ever since CONALITEG has existed, we were always paid for collaborating in the making of textbooks through their public call, and now it turns out we are no longer being paid... we decided to post on our social media about it because we saw that many colleagues were using their social networks to comment on it... We did not get an answer, not directly. CONALITEG posted a video on social media where they said: ‘There are more good people. Those who love the country will work on the books’ and by that they meant working for free” (Carolina, 31 March 2021).

The justification by the director of CONALITEG for scrapping payments in this annual call even when the budget was already allocated, was to allow saving around 3.75M USD of public treasury. Other editors find this decision as a political measure to align with the presidential policy of austerity. However, the cost-cutting defence gave no consideration to the professionals whose annual income relied on this substantial commitment.

As can be seen from these examples, the initial objectives of AMLO’s government have focused on decentralisation and redistribution of resources to communities (Secretaría de Cultura, 2020c). But policy implementation disrupted the dynamics, schedules, and plans of many creative

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr. <https://www.conaliteg.sep.gob.mx/CREADORES.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública) is the acronym for Mexico’s public education secretariat.

workers, revealing the challenges that come with battling corruption and managing resource redistribution in a context where precarious creative workers were not protected against the effects of new policies.

### **From bad to worse: the impact of the pandemic**

By the beginning of 2020, creative workers were experiencing the unforeseen negative effects of federal policy changes, programs, and strategies. Unfortunately, things became even harder in the following months, when the structures of the creative professions as they had historically been known, already under pressure, were definitively broken by the public health restrictions necessitated by COVID-19. Government agencies in charge of most cultural, artistic, and creative work already had several financial and planning problems, partially related to the changes promoted by the new federal government's austerity policy (DOF, 2020b). The early responses of institutions highlighted a disconnect between the stated aims and the actual accomplishments of government policies. Federal austerity policies, compounded by pandemic responses to further reduce budget expenses, created a worst-case scenario.

Government responses to the pandemic might well be characterised as disjointed. Different levels of government in charge of arts and culture management, like many other institutions, were ill-prepared for what a pandemic crisis would mean. In 2020, no one was certain of the duration of the crisis, and policy makers did not have the tools to calculate the likely short-term implications of their efforts; this lack of foresight was made clear when the first response from the government was to shut down every activity that required physical presence. Public forums were closed in early February 2020 and remained closed for 18 months with only a few intermittent openings in certain cultural spaces (Teatro UNAM, 2022). Initial sector reactions to the closures were slow, in the expectation that workers might only need to let a few weeks pass by, keeping social distance and avoiding physical contact. However, as the social distancing periods were extended and prolonged, the need for government institutions to find ways to enable the presence of cultural activities became more imminent.

Two examples of governmental initiatives implemented during the 2020 months of uncertainty: *Contigo en la distancia* and *Convocatoria para creadores y artistas. Contingencia COVID-19*. Our interviewees' experiences with these policies that were set in place as strategies

to face the pandemic demonstrate the policy conditions the government could create, and show such policies were received by creative workers in the socio-economic conditions of the pandemic.

*Contigo en la distancia* was an institutional strategy by *Secretaría de Cultura* to develop a large catalogue of art and cultural products for their digital channels, with the understanding that this was an open invitation to artists to keep creating, even if venues were shut down (*Secretaría de Cultura*, 25 March 2020). It was also an effort to raise the profile of the *Secretaría's* catalogue, which had been developed without public access for many years - making the catalogue public was a democratising exercise that could have been done before the social distancing crisis. The proposal was a positive effort in building audiences and putting together an artistic offering to educate and entertain while in lockdown. However, this strategy was more focused on the audience than on creative workers, who received almost no benefit from it.<sup>14</sup>

Although making every production available on a digital platform is a good effort to democratise public resources, and to create audiences, it did not address the hardship experienced by creative workers. Usually, *Secretaría de Cultura* productions are copyright of the institution since their creation is funded with public resources through public programs, scholarships, or callings, so their authors do not hold distribution rights. As a consequence, an official digital platform to make the institution productions available for the public represents neither a financial opportunity for creators, nor a possibility to enhance their public outreach.

In the search for an alternative to support creative workers, the federal government launched an emergent program in March 2020 that offered financial aid. *Convocatoria para creadores y artistas Contingencia COVID-19* was a one-time monetary transfer available for creative workers, specifically what they call creators and artists. The amount of money they received was around 1000 USD, with a series of limitations such as they should not work for any public agency within a year. Applicants had to send a set of documents to prove their professional eligibility to be selected and make a commitment to produce a work and to be included in the platform. The candidates would be prohibited from applying for any other government program

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<sup>14</sup> To date, there are no analysis of the results of this digital strategy; ideally researchers might be able to assess the policy's impact over time to produce robust and useful data. As of July 2023, the Sistema Nacional de Fomento Musical (National System for Music Promotion) catalogue's most viewed video has 1.1K views. Most of the videos vary from 43 to 607 views. <https://www.youtube.com/@FomentoMusical/videos>

for a whole year. Our interviewees narrated that it was such a struggle to apply for so little money, that it was not even worth the time and stress to try for the program:

They ask for experience, it's like you need to justify you already have a career, and your project is part of it. But they didn't ask for much in this last program that I mentioned Contigo *en la distancia*, there was even a TikTok category. Obviously, it was less money, it was only 1000 USD<sup>15</sup>, and you wouldn't be able to apply again (Ernesto, August 2021).

By the time COVID-19 emergency policies were set up, working, and living conditions had worsened for all the participants in our study. Incomes dropped to as low as \$180 USD per month in some cases, with already shaky sources of employment diminished, and in some cases completely disappeared. As our participants reported in their interviews, the pandemic period was a time in which they had to reinvent their daily lives, they had to reduce expenses, move out of rented places and back into their family home, or start sharing their place with a larger number of people. Many of them had to resort to alternative economic activities, outside of the limits of the creative sector to survive the absence of opportunities to do their usual creative work.

A friend of mine has a plastic factory, he is from my Jewish community, and he told me about a mask he designed. As he was starting to sell them, he offered me a good price to start myself. I was lucky that someone from TV Azteca bought a few and shared them with a tv presenter that contacted me to give an interview and record a segment, so I sold face shields like hot cakes for a good two or three months, literally. Then, the sales started to fade out and there wasn't going to be a way to recover from it because it was a natural process. I just saw it as an opportunity, not for the long term (Federico, 11 August 2021).

As we have pointed out elsewhere, (Authors, 2022c), workers had to resort to strategies of their own to economically survive during a time where creative work was shut down for most of them. According to their narratives, it was not government policies, strategies or programs that supported them. In the best cases, some creative workers had the possibility to move parts of their work, such as teaching, onto digital platforms. However, this was not an option for most creative workers due to the nature of their jobs. Many of them also claimed to have little knowledge or previous experience with digital tools and platforms or didn't have in hand the appropriate technologies and

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<sup>15</sup> Every money reference is calculated in US Dollars according to march-august 2021 currency exchange rate.

equipment. Many participants talked about finding support from their partners and families to get through the pandemic times, through loans, housing support, technology sharing, and food and medicine supplies.

A year ago, I needed immediate surgery, and (my mother) helped me pay for the surgery. She has used her income to plan for the future. In my family, we never turn to bank loans or things like that. When something unexpected happens, we turn to my mother (Carolina, 31 March, 2021).

Both *Contigo en la distancia* and *Convocatoria para creadores y artistas Contingencia COVID-19* were time limited strategies whose results, when they become available, will warrant further analysis. The website for *Contigo en la distancia* did not feature regular updated content after 2020, which is one reason why it did not become an important platform. *Convocatoria para creadores y artistas Contingencia COVID-19* was a one-time only call not released ever again. To date, there is no funding data available to the public, so it is unclear how much of the 2,000,000 USD in assigned funds was actually delivered to participating artists and creators. To this day there are some calculations from media,<sup>16</sup> and researchers (García Canclini, 2023) in terms of how many applicants got the funds, but when data is available it would be possible to contrast data and evaluate the program performance. For now, what we have available is the individual experiences, opinions, and interpretations from our interview's narratives, which has been our sociological approach to build an idea of how people lived and experienced what the government had to offer.

Historically, government institutions and cultural policy have been Mexican creative workers' main employer and the sector's main promoter. According to *Plan Sectorial de Cultura* (Secretaría de Cultura, 2020) this was also the path for the current government, but only some selected projects received more attention, and soon policies to enhance or improve creative workers' jobs were left behind. The crisis that came with COVID19 was especially challenging, but the strict austerity policy showed little empathy for critical times. Creative workers, particularly those most vulnerable, the youngest or those who work informally, are often left bewildered with the road this government is taking and are left reconsidering whether and how to build their careers. The aftermath of the pandemic leaves them with fewer job options from

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. <https://www.gob.mx/cultura/prensa/la-secretaria-de-cultura-da-a-conocer-los-resultados-de-la-convocatoria-contigo-en-la-distancia-movimiento-de-arte-en-casa?idiom=es>



government, having learned the only way they are going to keep working is by educating themselves, taking care of their finances, creating other forms of work to earn an income, and organising and demanding better work conditions.

### **Some final thoughts**

While the shocking and sudden nature of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt in 2020 to be shaking up the cultural sector, with time it has become increasingly clear that the pandemic was an intensifier rather than a cause of the precarious nature of creative work in Mexico. Throughout this paper we observed that the working conditions laid out for the sector from the government agencies are characterised by precarious working conditions, a characteristic that existed before the current AMLO government, and prior to the arrival of the pandemic. Clearly, the practice of rolling out sub-optimal working conditions for the creative sector is not a novelty. However, the left-wing political identity of the current federal government, which championed ‘the people’ as a priority, led many workers of the creative sector to believe and expect that their conditions would notably improve. During the first months of the government, the budget was announced, and their policies focused on battling corruption, austerity and directing support to popular cultures. But consequently, this meant large budget cuts to projects and staffing in government institutions. As a result, there were clashes of opinions within sectors that felt underrepresented or punished by the new policies.

In general, the response of key cultural institutions like the Secretaría de Cultura, which is an important employer for the sector, was not to open a dialogue with disaffected creative workers. Measures taken by the current government soon after their election appear to have underestimated creative sector workers and undervalue their labour, also making evident a disarticulation between the government agencies and their workers. When the pandemic crisis arose in March 2020 the sector was already disgruntled with the government's early measures for culture and artistic matters. Federal and local governments responded to the pandemic with more austerity, minimal help packages, and calls to work for free. Therefore, the precarious working conditions of the sector were not improved, and rather intensified with the rollout of social distancing and the instability created by a year full of scattered attempts at reopening public spaces and restoring creative jobs.

A positive outcome of this lack of attention and help from the government agencies has been the improved organisation of different artistic disciplines, guilds, and unions to come up with alternative programs and seek some discussion and understanding with the federal agents. However, this has not generated a significant reciprocated response from government agencies. On their part, government efforts have focused on making cultural products available to the public, and even after the pandemic lockdowns, we can see a large effort to build audiences and honour their “no one left behind” motto as a guide for policy making. But despite these rethorics, labour conditions are not being improved for creative workers; on the contrary, the state has proven to lack the will and knowledge to be effective in creating dignified working conditions and regulations for creative labour, as well as in creating effective strategies to support them in times of emergency.

The post-COVID years have been a challenge that Mexico’s creative workers have faced with their own tools and strategies. In doing so, they have also created a stronger public consciousness of the working conditions of their sector, not only in terms of the prevailing precarity of contracts, social services, payments, and stability, but also in showing how this precarity is reflected in their daily lives. For them, precarious work conditions is also a way to build an identity that brings them together through a type of work that earns an income, but sometimes it also needs to be sponsored by a diversity of activities and ways so they can persist in a world where institutions have little knowledge of what it takes to keep their work going and their career surviving.

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