

Creative Industries as Economic Infrastructure in Small Developing Economies

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www.ijrah.com || Vol. 6 No. 2 (2026): March Issue

Date of Submission: 15-03-2026

Date of Acceptance: 22-03-2026

Date of Publication: 25-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This article argues that cultural and creative industries should be treated as economic infrastructure rather than as marginal lifestyle sectors in small developing economies. The analysis contends that music, film, festivals, design, literary production, digital content, and heritage-based enterprise generate value not only through direct revenue and employment but also through tourism spillovers, export identity, place branding, skills formation, and urban regeneration. Yet policy frameworks often underinvest in the sector because they misclassify cultural production as consumption rather than production. Drawing on UNESCO policy work and Caribbean regional initiatives, the article advances a framework for viewing creative industries as systems that require finance, rights protection, training, data, and market access. The development challenge is therefore not whether culture matters economically, but whether governments are prepared to build the institutional ecosystem that allows cultural value to compound.

Keywords- creative industries; cultural economy; development; Caribbean; policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

In many small developing economies, creative sectors are widely celebrated rhetorically but weakly governed economically. Music, festivals, performance, fashion, film, visual art, craft, literary work, and digital content are routinely described as expressions of identity, yet rarely treated as strategic sectors requiring the same policy seriousness as logistics, manufacturing, or agribusiness. This is a conceptual error. Creative industries generate employment, foreign exchange, urban vitality, brand visibility, and social cohesion. They also create intangible assets whose value multiplies across tourism, media, education, and exports (UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2022).

UNESCO's recent policy work has reinforced this point by treating culture not as an expendable ornament but as part of a broader public-good

framework linked to rights, development, and economic resilience (UNESCO, 2022, 2024a). The practical implication is significant: if culture is developmentally productive, then the state's role is not simply to subsidize artistic events, but to build the enabling conditions for cultural enterprise (Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2002).

II. WHY CREATIVE SECTORS FUNCTION AS INFRASTRUCTURE

The concept of economic infrastructure is usually reserved for physical systems. Yet sectors can also function infrastructurally when they enable wider economic activity, network effects, and spatial development. Creative industries do exactly this. A

successful festival ecosystem supports transport, hospitality, food services, media, and small business. Film and music shape destination branding. Design and digital content enhance export visibility. Heritage assets anchor local identity while supporting enterprise and tourism circulation (UNCTAD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

In small economies, these multiplier effects are especially important because market size is limited and sectoral diversification is often difficult. Creative industries provide a route to value creation that relies less on heavy capital and more on skills, originality, rights management, and network reach. UNESCO's Creative Caribbean initiative explicitly frames the cultural economy as a site for jobs, market access, entrepreneurial development, and reduced dependency on external financing (UNESCO, 2024b). That framing is precisely what policy should adopt more broadly (Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2001).

III. THE POLICY GAP

The major weakness is not lack of talent. It is lack of ecosystem design. Creatives often operate in informal conditions, without reliable contracts, accessible finance, market intelligence, rights enforcement, or professional support services. Governments may sponsor events while neglecting registries, data systems, export facilitation, digital monetization, and training in management and intellectual property. As a result, cultural production remains vibrant but commercially fragile (UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2022).

This fragility is often worsened by policy fragmentation. Tourism ministries, culture ministries, trade agencies, city authorities, and education systems may all touch the sector without building a coherent pipeline from creation to monetization. The result is undercapitalized growth. The sector produces visibility and social energy, but not enough durable business structure (Howkins, 2001; Florida, 2002).

IV. BUILDING THE CREATIVE-ECONOMY ECOSYSTEM

A serious policy agenda would begin with four pillars. First, data and recognition: states need registries, measurement frameworks, and better statistics on employment, revenue, and spillovers. Second, finance and enterprise support: grant systems should be complemented by credit products, co-investment tools, export-readiness support, and business training. Third, rights and formalization: contract literacy, collective management, platform governance, and artist remuneration matter if creative work is to become economically durable. Fourth, market architecture: festivals, residencies, distribution channels, digital strategy, and regional networks are not peripheral add-

ons; they are the infrastructure through which creative value travels (UNCTAD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

The normative shift is equally important. Creative policy should not ask whether culture deserves support as a concession. It should ask what institutional design is needed for cultural production to become self-sustaining, tradable, and developmentally catalytic (Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2001).

V. FINANCING, RIGHTS, AND THE CREATIVE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Treating creative industries as infrastructure requires a shift from celebration to ecosystem design. Artists and creative firms need contract enforceability, intellectual-property administration, revenue collection systems, export support, and access to patient finance. Without those institutional supports, the sector remains trapped in informality even when talent is abundant. Economic value is then extracted by distributors, foreign platforms, or intermediaries rather than retained by domestic creators and firms (UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2022).

In small economies, this business environment matters more, not less. Market size is limited, so firms depend on network effects, digital distribution, niche branding, and cross-border reach. Policy must therefore take seriously the mundane but decisive issues of licensing, taxation, micro-enterprise formalization, collective management, and data on sector performance. A creative economy cannot be governed credibly if the state does not know who is producing, how value is captured, or where the principal bottlenecks to scale actually lie (Howkins, 2001; UNESCO, 2022).

VI. CREATIVE PRODUCTION AS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The developmental case for creative industries is stronger than a narrow culture policy frame suggests. Creative production animates tourism, city branding, education, digital services, youth employment, and export diversification. It also produces symbolic value that shapes how a country is known abroad and how communities understand themselves at home. These are not soft side benefits. They are part of the economic architecture through which small states differentiate themselves in crowded markets and build resilience against overdependence on a few traditional sectors (Florida, 2002; UNCTAD, 2022).

A serious state strategy should therefore connect cultural policy with industrial policy. Training, incubators, festival platforms, digital rights management, export promotion, and urban creative districts can work together when institutions are aligned around a coherent value chain. The central policy question is no longer

whether culture deserves support, but whether governments are prepared to govern creativity as a productive system with measurable returns and long-run developmental significance (UNESCO, 2022; Howkins, 2001).

VII. CONCLUSION

Small developing economies cannot afford to treat creative industries as symbolic sectors alone. They are forms of economic infrastructure whose effects spill across tourism, trade, skills, urban development, and identity. The strategic task is to move from celebration to system-building. Once culture is governed as an economic ecosystem rather than an occasional event, its

developmental value becomes far easier to see and far easier to scale (UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2022).

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