Hanna Kosonen, born in 1976, is a Member of Parliament representing the Finnish Centre Party. First elected in 2015, she is now serving her second term as a Member of Parliament. Ms Kosonen will serve as the Minister of Science and Culture from August 2019 to August 2020. In parliament she has worked as a member of the Environment Committee and of the Education and Culture Committee, and as the First Vice Chairman of the Centre Party parliamentary group. Before working as a Member of Parliament, Ms Kosonen worked for 10 years in the private sector in the fields of communications and culture production and in the creative industries. She also has a background in professional athletics. She holds a Master’s degree in the arts from the University of Jyväskylä.

1. Please explain why the field of arts and health has flourished in the Finnish context? Why does Finland see this as an important initiative? And why has arts and health gained political support over the years?

As human beings we are holistic – and so is our well-being. This holistic approach is based on the understanding that by meeting and nourishing mental and emotional needs we support people’s well-being. By strengthening people’s cultural rights, the well-being of the entire population increases. The results of research on the effects of art on well-being and health are indisputable. A brief moment dedicated to art is as good for mental health as a walk in the woods. In this sense, culture and physical activity are cut from the same cloth.

In order for art and culture to be a part of our everyday life, they must be expanded beyond the conventional sphere of culture. Art and culture should in fact be part of the living environment.

The Constitution of Finland safeguards the right to education and culture. This means that cultural policy in Finland has the strongest possible legal foundation.

The main objective of the Ministry of Education and Culture's strategy for cultural policy up to 2025 is to increase inclusion and participation in culture and to reduce disparities in participation between different population groups. The underlying view is that place of residence, living environment, age, state of health, functional capacity, language, wealth or ethnic, religious or cultural background should not be an obstacle to engaging in culture and living a good life. Particular attention is placed on making sure that art and culture are easily available and accessible and that cultural rights are realized.

2. The Ministry of Education and Culture is working with the Health and Welfare Ministry on this project. What have been the benefits of this cross-sectoral approach? What are
the challenges? And are there any lessons that you have learned as a result of this journey?

Our cross-administrative approach has increased the flow of information between ministries and helped find common objectives for the activities. We see similar challenges in all cross-administrative development work; each administrative branch prioritizes its traditional activities over joint projects. Joint development work often tends to be seen as an “extra” task. The same challenge applies to both public officials and us political decision-makers.

It makes economic sense to strengthen well-being and health through art and culture. But unfortunately, preventive measures always end up in second place when acute needs are high and corrective action is required.

It has been challenging to allocate permanent funding schemes to these activities. Finland, too, should take affirmative steps in progressing from project-based work towards establishing forms of action. I am confident that we are close to finding good models for this.

3. How do you see arts and health developing in the future? What would be the benefits of mainstreaming arts and health across the WHO European Region (and indeed, the globe)?

I have high hopes and trust that we will learn to see people more holistically, both in Finland and throughout the world. This way, cultural needs will also be better taken into account.

For example, elderly people each have a history of their own and their own preferences for recreational activities. We are showing respect for their right to self-determination when we take each elderly person’s uniqueness into consideration in their last years of life.

4. What further support would you wish to see from WHO for this mainstreaming of arts and health interventions in the health systems of its Member States?

I am pleased that the procedures developed in Finland have attracted international interest. Finland is also very interested in learning from other countries, and joint forums are needed. I encourage WHO to continue to keep the issue of cultural well-being alive and to take new initiatives related to it.

In particular, more extensive research on the economic benefits of art activities in support of decision-making and operations would be welcome across the field. Although those of us who are friends of art and culture believe that there are rational justifications for cultural and art activities without the need for economic arguments, cold hard facts are warranted to justify the economic viability of the activities to our partners.

It is also important to break down the theme of cultural well-being into concrete terms, seen from the viewpoints of the procurer of cultural activities, the authors of such activities and the consumers of the activities. Concrete procedures encourage new people to create practices suitable for their own culture and operating environments. It would be wonderful to see the different forms of art and culture that apply to different cultures and service systems being brought together into one publication. Perhaps one day WHO might publish such a book.

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