

# Recommendations for a Sustainable Nordic and Baltic Dance Field

keõja Sustainability Think Tank Report 2015



## The keõja Think Tank calls for a holistic approach

# 1. Introduction

Sustainability in the dance field is composed of four interconnected dimensions: cultural (including artistic), ecological, economic and social. It is therefore only natural that in order to strengthen the sustainability of the dance field it is necessary to pay attention to all four key aspects. The keõja Think Tank on Sustainability calls for a holistic approach in dance sector development, taking into account the entire value chain and the life cycle of artistic work and careers. The recommendations are divided into five key areas with the following aims: (1) to build bridges between the dance field and the rest of the society, (2) to develop necessary skills and competences, (3) to develop support systems for the dance field, (4) to encourage internationalisation and networking and (5) to establish sustainable funding mechanisms.

As the specific conditions for dance and for people working within the dance sector vary from country to country, all participating countries are invited either to create a new strategy or update an existing strategy for a sustainable dance field that best meets their country-specific needs. The strategy formulation process should be inclusive, as it could be used as a tool for raising awareness and networking within the field. It is recommended that the strategies be based on the holistic principles laid out in this report and relate to the four dimensions of sustainable development.

On behalf of the keõja Think Tank we hope that this report will prove to be a useful tool and contribute both to raised awareness and concrete measures regarding sustainability on the dance field.

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Dance Info Finland

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## 2. Background

### What is keõja?

Keõja is a platform for the Nordic-Baltic contemporary dance community that aims to develop the concept of, and possibilities for, contemporary dance in the Nordic-Baltic region. Since 2008 keõja has been the single largest platform for dance artists as well as educators, producers, writers and artists from other fields to meet and address important issues within the contemporary dance field in the Nordic-Baltic region. Artistic events, workshops, seminars and other kinds of exchange have taken place, empowering dance professionals from the whole Nordic-Baltic region.

**keõja is  
the largest  
Nordic-Baltic  
platform  
for dance**

### What was the goal of the keõja Think Tank?

What can sustainability mean for the dance field? How do we want to define sustainability? Inadequate funding schemes, short-term solutions, short-lived productions - how should the dance field be developed in a more sustainable manner? The keõja Think Tank was assembled to address these key issues surrounding sustainable development of the Nordic-Baltic dance field. The Think Tank worked from 2012 to 2014 to define, discuss and debate the issues, with the overall aim of providing concrete suggestions for more sustainable operational strategies within the Nordic and Baltic dance field.

**Concrete  
suggestions  
for  
sustainable  
strategies**

### Who was involved in the keõja Think Tank?

The composition of the Think Tank was designed to include different national perspectives, experiences and systems, as well as to involve both practitioners and policymakers. The experts were Tove Bratten (director of Performing Arts Hub Norway), Riitta Heinämaa (director of the Finnish Institute in Estonia), Audronis Imbrasas (director of the Lithuanian Dance Information Centre), Sari Palmgren (freelance choreographer and dancer from Finland), Sanna Rekola (director of Dance Info Finland), Torsten Schenlaer (head of the Cultural Department of the City of Lund) and Ragnar Siil (chair of the European Union Expert Group on Cultural and Creative Industries, former Estonian Undersecretary for the Arts). Coordinator of the Think Tank was Katarina Lindholm (project manager at Dance Info Finland).

### 3. State of play of the dance sector in the Nordic-Baltic region

#### Strengths

**The dance field is increasingly internationally oriented**

The dance field is currently undergoing a renaissance of sorts in the Nordic-Baltic region. The popularity of dance has been growing steadily, and so has the awareness of dance as an art form and its potential impact on the rest of society. There are signs of dance moving from the margins toward the centre of culture and the performing arts. Even though the Nordic-Baltic region is quite small in global terms, it is very diverse and rapidly changing. The Nordic countries have internationally known dance artists, and together with the up-and-coming Baltic dance field there is great potential for further development. The dance field in the Nordics and Baltics is increasingly internationally oriented.

The Nordic countries have world-class infrastructure and high-quality education along with major festivals and networks, while the Baltics have witnessed remarkable developments over the last two decades. The dance sector has successfully integrated the use of innovative technologies and has strong links to new media and other new art forms. Keđja itself has also significantly contributed to creating closer ties among the dance communities throughout the entire region via its encounters, residencies and mentoring programmes.

#### Weaknesses

**Funding structures do not support sustainability**

The main weaknesses are similar to those in the contemporary dance field elsewhere around the world. As a sector that mostly involves an independent art field with individual artists or micro-companies, the dance field is not sufficiently funded by the public authorities, especially compared with more established and institutionalised cultural sectors. At the same time, the prospects for earning money from ticket sales or involving corporate sponsorship are fairly limited. The current state of play varies among the different countries in the Nordic-Baltic region: while national or local support for dance projects and companies as well as for infrastructure is fairly well developed in some countries, the possibilities for dance funding are much more limited in others. Dance education provides a good artistic foundation, but often it does not address the skills needed to prepare artists to manage their careers successfully. Due to the limited size of markets there is also a lack of professional intermediaries (e.g. managers and agents).

Dance has not been given the same priority as some other cultural fields – this is true in terms of the inclusion of dance in cultural policies and their priorities, the available infrastructure, the range of funding mechanisms allocated for dance and the inadequacy of long-term support for dance institutions and initiatives. Most national funding opportunities do not encourage internationalisation: national co-financing opportunities for cross-border projects differ greatly from country to country, as do grants for travel and touring. While there is support for existing and established dance companies, it is very difficult to find support for new initiatives (lack of start-up funding or seed capital, to use two examples from other sectors). The lack of social guarantees for artists also mean that there is no exit strategy and no opportunities for career breaks or other alternatives for many dance artists, which in turn does not encourage a healthy life cycle within the sector.

## Opportunities

There is a clear trend towards greater awareness and popularity of physical activity, which also means that more people are taking part in dance lessons. This in turn has a positive impact on widening the audience base. Also as the extensive use of information technologies and changing working patterns leads to less face-to-face social communication, dance will become an increasingly important art form in bringing people together and offering a unique kinaesthetic experience.

The lines between different art forms as well as between the independent and the institutional cultural scenes have been continuously blurred, which has led to innovative forms of cooperation between the dance field and other sectors and also has created new opportunities in terms of use of spaces and other limited resources. In recent years, countries and local municipalities have been investing more in cultural exports and internationalisation, which creates good opportunities for the dance field to intensify collaboration within the Nordic-Baltic region.

## Threats

Continuing political and economic instability could lead to prolonged stagnation or even further cuts in culture budgets. This has a negative effect on the entire cultural scene, but especially the independent scene - including dance. Budget restraints have a direct impact on long-term funding decisions and mobility schemes.

**Dance will become increasingly important in bringing people together**

**Economic instability affects especially the independent scene**

## 4. Holistic approach to dance sector development

**Dance requires support that takes into account the entire value chain**

The Think Tank firmly believes that sustainability in the dance field (as in any other aspect of life) is composed of four interconnected dimensions: cultural (including artistic), ecological, economic and social. It is therefore only natural that in order to strengthen the sustainability of the dance field it is necessary to pay attention to all four key aspects. This is what we call the need for a holistic approach.

Dance shares many common strengths and challenges with other cultural fields, yet it is also a very distinct sector in many respects. There is a lack of institutional and infrastructural framework (compared with theatre or music), differences in market orientation and business focus (compared with e.g. design, architecture or entertainment software development) and differences in industry organisation, participation and consumption models (compared with e.g. the film or music industry). Dance requires tailor-made, flexible and systemic support that takes into account the entire value chain and a variety of existing operating models.

**Sustainability has to be built on “slow work”**

A sustainable dance field has a long-lasting and wide-reaching impact on society. It is diverse and open to change. It provides valuable insights and solutions in tackling some of the most pressing issues in the society, being therefore not part of the problem, but part of the solution. In most cases this takes time and requires long-term vision and planning. And yet the funding regulations are often impatient, placing emphasis on quick and visible results, which in turns leads to short-term planning and project-based financing. Sustainability has to be built on “slow work”, i.e. taking time to do things well. In general, sustainability is a process rather than a goal in itself. It is strongly linked to a sense of responsibility, sharing and trust. Sustainability comes with “slow profitability”, as it takes time (and thus also money) to work sustainably.

**Growth in the dance field is about strengthening the system**

Even though the dance sector has witnessed continuous growth in recent years, it is clear that linear growth is non-sustainable. There are different kinds of growth, including horizontal and vertical, qualitative and quantitative, and so more sophisticated tools are needed to identify and measure it. The objective for policymakers and funding institutions cannot simply be more dance for the money - more in terms of companies, performances, dancers, audiences, etc. Growth in the dance field is about strengthening the system in order to create a strong environment for the creation, development and sustainability of dance, both nationally and internationally.

It would be easy to claim that the main thing the dance sector needs is more money. And it surely does, but what it needs even more is smarter ways of investing in dance. With smarter rules, regulations, funding principles, feedback, mentoring, reporting and statistics on national and international levels, the funds already in place could be used more effectively. We focus on a system that needs to be perfect, even though there is no such thing. We need to be able to change what doesn't work and to revise the support system continuously. It's not about creating a perfect system, but instead about creating a flexible and adaptive process.

In addition, the holistic approach is closely connected with life-cycle thinking. For a funding agency it is reasonably straightforward to support a well-established dance company, but for new and emerging artists or newly founded companies it is extremely difficult to find support. Also, once a company has entered the system, it is often difficult to stop financing that company even if it shows no artistic development. In short, there is a need for clear entrance and exit strategies accompanied by a set of seed funding for up-and-coming, new and innovative ideas and a set of social guarantees to help dancers and companies to take time off, to regroup or to wind down their activities when necessary. That winding down or changeover phase, which is natural for all processes, could then be a source of fresh ideas and new beginnings. The current support system is based on a model of continuous success, but it needs to better acknowledge the role of occasional failures. Failures in the dance field, as in any creative area, are often sources of future development and success. A comprehensive policy and funding system must pay attention to all these phases.

The dance field does not exist in isolation. It should be seen as an "ecosystem" with different partners, surrounding structures and conditions. Members of the ecosystem need to make use of their resources in the most efficient way. These resources are different for each artist. And the dance community itself should acknowledge this. There is a need for increased awareness within the dance field and a readiness to change and adapt to new challenges. At the same time, too many changes in the environment surrounding the dance field in a short time itself create additional obstacles for the sustainable development of freelance artists and dance companies that often lack the necessary resources to adapt to new conditions.

**Life-cycle  
thinking  
is needed**

**The  
dance field  
should be  
seen as  
an ecosystem**





## 5. Recommendations for sustainable sector development

### The “social contract” between the dance field and the society

Based on the holistic approach and the need to develop a favourable ecosystem for the Nordic-Baltic dance field, the Think Tank proposes a set of recommendations. The following recommendations are addressed both to policymakers on regional, national and international levels as well as to the dance community. The first set of recommendations is aimed at renewing the “social contract” between the dance field and the rest of society, raising awareness and making the dance field more accessible. The second part of recommendations concentrates on developing key competences and skills for dance artists. The third part looks at different support measures and the need for strengthening mediators and meeting platforms. The fourth section is about enhancing networking and the internationalisation of the dance field. The final part brings together the recommendations on setting up suitable funding systems on all levels to encourage sustainability in the dance field.

## 5.1. Building bridges between the dance field and wider audiences and the rest of society

The dance field must be brought from the margins to the centre, both in terms of audience awareness and cultural political attention. In order to achieve that, the dance field should also reposition itself – find its place in society and form a new social contract with society. In communication, this requires the use of more positive rhetoric (possibilities, potential) instead of negative rhetoric (victimisation) – emphasising strengths, benefits (e.g. improved physical and mental health, social wellbeing, etc.) and favourable spill-over effects (e.g. social inclusion etc.) on society.

### Recommendations

1. Invite people from other parts of society into the dance field, e.g. by appointing "outsiders" to the boards of dance theatres, venues, companies, etc. This helps to build synergies between the dance field and other sectors. It also brings additional skills and external know-how from different areas into dance organisations, raises awareness of people from outside the dance field, and brings about more openness and transparency.
2. There is a need for better and more strategic communication both inside and outside the dance field. It has been seen as crucial when it comes to communicating results, the spill-over effects and intrinsic values of dance as an art form. More importance should be placed on artistic processes as well as how society overall is taken into account. This is why the Nordic-Baltic dance field should develop a joint communication strategy.
3. A key element in raising awareness and building bridges between the dance field and the rest of society is introducing dance in schools for different age groups. This is aimed at building new audiences and awareness as well as bringing the positive effects of dance to children and the school system as a whole. For this reason schools should provide a suitable framework for this kind of collaboration, while public authorities should introduce new financing models, or intensify existing ones, to bring culture closer to children. Dance artists and companies should develop inspiring, coherent packages and workshop models to be used in schools.
4. There is a need for an evidence-based study on the societal impacts of dance, bringing together comprehensive data and good practices on the contribution of dance to social, economic, educational and ecological developments.

**The dance field must be brought from the margins to the centre**

## 5.2. Developing necessary skills and competences

The following recommendations do not cover issues concerning artistic education in the dance field, but they do focus on the set of key skills and competences necessary for success in the 21st century. Dance education must take into account the real-life needs of the dance field and society at large. The dance education system should be adjusted to meet the needs of today's society and the main developments in the dance field.

### Recommendations

**Dance education should meet the real-life needs of the dance field**

1. Competitive dance education needs to better address the survival skills that dance artists and professionals need, in order to reduce the “help me” mindset and to equip these people with the tools necessary to manage their career path and dance companies innovatively and sustainably. For this reason, current dance curricula should be critically analysed.
2. The dance sector needs professional intermediaries – managers, organisers, agents, producers, etc. The education system should provide experience and understanding of how collaboration between artists and producers works. Possible ways to achieve this are by implementing joint programmes between different universities and departments or organising awareness-raising and matchmaking events.
3. Setting up cross-border exchange programmes and cooperation initiatives between universities in the Nordic-Baltic region.
4. Organising cross-border internships and study visits for dance professionals, dance field mediators and policymakers in order to foster learning from good practices and to build networks. Local, regional and national funding systems should support this cross-border exchange.
5. Life-long learning programmes should be adjusted to the needs of dance artists. Dance artists are encouraged to continuously further their education and add new skills and competences to be competitive in the job market throughout their career. Public funding should be available for allowing dance artists to participate in those training programmes. Life-long learning programmes are not only those provided by education institutions; they also include numerous programmes and other activities carried out by dance companies and other dance organisations.

### 5.3. Developing support systems for the dance field

On one hand, the dance field often lacks the institutional and infrastructural frameworks common to other artistic fields. On the other hand, with the increased efforts to develop the cultural and creative industries, there is a renewed effort to set up new forms of development structures within the arts and creative industries, e.g. setting up hubs, clusters, incubators, turning old industrial spaces into cultural venues etc. While it is important to understand the special nature of the cultural and creative industries in the context of the dance sector, it is also clear that this movement could create new opportunities for the dance field as a whole.

#### Recommendations

1. Redesign the model of creative incubators and hubs to incorporate the specific character of dance companies. Ensure that staff possess knowledge of both culture and business and are able to support the ideas and skills of new companies, rather than creating another company in a set mould.
2. Support arts communities in order to establish better communication, exchange of ideas and networks, new meeting platforms and thus a more sustainable use of public funding.
3. With the emergence of new working models, there is a great need for intermediaries in the dance field (producers, managers, curators etc.). In addition, the emergence of new clusters, networks and other forms of co-ops should be supported.
4. Open up the funding measures of the cultural and creative industries to the dance sector. However, it is important to understand that often dance companies do not fit into the cultural and creative business logic. This means it is necessary to adopt criteria that take into account the specific operating models of the dance field.

**Hubs, clusters,  
incubators -  
new  
opportunities  
for the  
dance field**

## 5.4. Encouraging internationalisation and networking in the dance field

The dance field has become more internationally focused. Touring and cross-border cooperation increases artists' income opportunities, prolongs the life of productions and improves the balance between the independent sector and public institutions. There exists a diversity of mobility, as mobility is connected to cultural cooperation, cultural exchange, artistic exchange, travel and research grants, go-and-see grants, international co-productions, studio and residence programmes etc. Currently, the funding sources for these different activities in each country are often scattered and do not allow for synergies between different activities.

### Recommendations

1. There is a need for a better overview of the state of play in each country in the Nordic-Baltic region, including dance companies, venues, funding opportunities, residencies, regulations, taxes, etc. The national dance information centres, dance associations or other relevant bodies could be focal points for increased cooperation and act as a "one-stop-shop" for dance companies from other countries.
2. Supporting dance festivals (and other festivals or events that include dance) and joint networks in the Nordic-Baltic region, which enhance both the cooperation within the region and could also act as hubs for performances from other continents.
3. There is a need for new mobility funding policies and funding lines to support different types of mobility. These funds should create opportunities to stay longer in a region when touring and travelling. With the increased importance of internationalisation, more cultural export and touring funds should be made available for the dance sector, including adding a funding line for touring to the Nordic-Baltic mobility programme. The Nordic Culture Fund should earmark an amount for Nordic-Baltic cooperation.
4. There should be national co-financing available in all the Nordic and Baltic countries for projects that have been financed by international programmes (including Nordic-Baltic programmes, Interreg and Creative Europe). Application dates and deadlines of those co-financing measures should be synchronised as much as possible.
5. Mobility could be regarded as more sustainable if it was contextualised, i.e. if something more was added to a tour/visit besides just a few performances, for example workshops or staying in the region for a longer time. More attention to audience outreach is also desirable, e.g. organising more workshops and making the most out of a stay when performing abroad.
6. Encourage the development of dance residencies and collaboration between residencies in the Nordic-Baltic area. There should be funding available for participating in cross-border residency activities and work done with local communities.

**Touring increases income opportunities and prolongs the life of productions**

## 5.5. Establishing sustainable funding mechanisms on all levels

A holistic approach to the dance field requires a holistic funding system. Governments need to utilise ongoing analysis of the arts and trends within society and the economy, on local, regional and global levels. Sustainable policies and strategies need to pay much more attention to the dance field. This in turn means we need better statistics and data for the sector and its short-term and long-term impacts. In order to achieve long-term impact, there is a clear need to move from project-based funding to process-based funding. A variety of funding sources and types of funding is one criterion for sustainable funding.

### Recommendations

1. There must be a shift from passive decision-making (decisions made without discussions, feedback or involvement of the dance field) into interactive decision-making. The decision-makers should involve the dance sector in both cultural policy and strategy formulation, but models should also be established for more inclusive funding mechanisms. There should be more discussions, instead of merely submitting applications and issuing reports on paper. Funding agencies should make the guidelines for grants clear and transparent.
2. More coaching is needed in the application process. Funding agencies should give feedback together with their funding decisions – a general summary and individual feedback, for successful as well as unsuccessful applicants.
3. The funding lines should correspond to life-cycle thinking, where things have a beginning (incubation phase or seed money), middle (development phase) and an end (changeover phase, from which you can go back to the beginning or on to the next level). There should be funding for all phases. Funding should also be available for other kinds of activities besides performances.
4. Long-term planning will help in using resources in the most effective way. In some cases, collective support could be more sustainable than individual support; therefore there should be funding opportunities for co-ops, hubs, centres, clusters, etc. Possibilities for long-term funding should be looked into.
5. The existing restrictions on making a profit currently do not create incentives for maximising incomes that could in turn be used later for project development and internationalisation.
6. The funding systems need to be diverse and flexible. There should be both big, long-term money and small, fast money. Unnecessary or excessive criteria should be eliminated, and the remaining criteria must be transparent and well communicated to the dance community. There should be funding bodies that can react quickly with project money to generate and maintain momentum – in other words, a pot of flexible funding. Always keep a sum for unexpected, brilliant ideas that could generate additional funding for your country, region and city through channels such as EU funding.
7. There is a need for more sophisticated indicators to measure quality and growth and to understand the full contribution of the dance field to the rest of society.

**A variety of  
funding sources  
and types**



This publication has been funded with support from the European Commission.  
This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission  
cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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keđja 2012-2015  
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Online version: [www.danceinfo.fi](http://www.danceinfo.fi) and [www.kedja.net](http://www.kedja.net)

Editing: Ragnar Siil, Sanna Rekola & Katarina Lindholm  
Illustrations: © Kuvitellen  
Layout: Etsuro Design  
Print: Erweko Oy, 2015



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