

## Overview

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Culture is an amorphous and multi-faceted concept, yet it is fundamental to each person's existence. Culture gives meaning by helping us make sense of the world and understand our place in it. The 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity calls culture the 'set of distinctive, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group', besides art and literature, it encompasses 'lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs'. While these all have universal elements, groups and communities are set apart by the characteristics that are particular to them.

There is a growing discourse on valuing cultural diversity, freedom of thought, and enabling cultural expression within societies. The UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions is the most recent international treaty to promote cultural diversity and reaffirm the links between culture, development and dialogue as part of a platform for international co-operation. It supports earlier conventions on culture, and the notion that cultural rights have a place alongside civil and political rights.

The case studies in this *Toolkit* offer practical examples of how culture can support social transformation and foster dialogue, and illustrate some of the challenges faced by practitioners and solutions used.

## Culture and development

Culture plays a role in the development process but it is not a determinant of development. In their 1995 report, *Our Creative Diversity*, the World Commission on Culture and Development highlighted the dual nature of culture in development: its instrumental function as a means to social and economic progress, as well as its more fundamental role in determining those things we place value on.

### Starting where people are

Cultural strategies for community development are a way of reaching people in their comfort zones and then building on that, as Rulu Arts Promoters have done by using the songs, stories, poetry and drama of three villages in Tanzania to stimulate collective action to strengthen local government, fight corruption and increase women's participation. It is not just performing arts that can be used in this way. Communication and Development and Learning (CDL), an NGO in Bangalore, India, uses comic books to educate children about their rights.

All too often research findings never get back to the people who informed them, but as Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA), A national NGO network in Uganda found, theatre is an effective medium for doing this. A dramatised national report on governance helped the research issues become part of the public discourse, and the initial performance prompted the staging of two additional thematic productions adapted from the original. NGOs in Papua New Guinea have similarly used theatre to help people understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens.

### Transformation and community pride

Using cultural expression to explore issues is often transformative for the individuals and communities involved. In the United Kingdom, a three-year programme built around carnival traditions was an important element of Luton's urban regeneration agenda to tackle social exclusion. Arts Council England says that in addition to gaining news skills, community members have increased pride and self-confidence.

Jamaica's Area Youth Foundation used performing arts to diffuse tension between factions in five volatile inner-city communities in Kingston. Today, a mural memorialises the communities' achievement and depicts their aspirations, and a new community development organisation now mediates when there are flare-ups in any of the areas.

By working together to conceptualise and create a community woodcarving, residents of a culturally diverse neighbourhood in New Westminster, Canada, were able to articulate shared values and increase their sense of belonging and community pride.

Even when the broader developmental objective may be rights education, governance, or cross-cultural understanding, building life skills is an important element of many arts interventions, particularly those involving children and youth. The discipline of preparing productions for public consumption, performing, negotiating, collaborating and working to deadlines is transferable to other areas of participants' lives.

### *Developing cultural industries for economic benefit*

Employment and income generation is a key concern for remote Aboriginal communities in Australia's Northern Territory. A music training project is helping Nabarlek, a performing and recording group of indigenous musicians, do just this. With support from established industry players, Nabarlek now owns recording equipment and has established a music industry enterprise. Importantly, they also own their recordings. For group members, this is the road to economic independence. For other young musicians, they are an inspiration.

### *A starting point, not an end*

While cultural forms are effective mobilising tools, they are no substitute for sustained action or addressing underlying problems. A community organisation formed through the Rulu Arts Promoters' project is advancing the governance agenda locally. Area Youth Foundation has found that while music and dance can help build peace, the next step for troubled communities has to be to tackle lack of opportunity.

## **Valuing creativity as a social force**

Those who create and transmit culture make important contributions to society, but this is often undervalued. The 2004 UNDP Human Development Report, *Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, recognises allowing people full cultural expression as an important development end.

One of the aims of the Commonwealth Foundation's Arts and Crafts Awards is to increase cross-cultural understanding through artistic exchange, but a second, and equally important, objective is to recognise individual artists and provide them an opportunity to develop their technique during a residency in another Commonwealth country.

### *Creating opportunity*

Where artistic and cultural expressions are undervalued, deliberate efforts have to be made to create a supportive environment for both production and consumption. Through its New Writing Programme, Artscape Theatre Centre is developing indigenous playwrights in South Africa's Western Cape, offering people 'particularly previously disadvantaged individuals, the opportunity to dream of writing a professional play and see it produced.'

For more than a decade, FEMRITE in Uganda has been cultivating women writers to address the gender imbalance in the literary arts. Efforts have paid off. Workshop participants have gone on to win national and international prizes, including the National Book Trust of Uganda Literary Award and the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa.

FEMRITE participants have also had success in the Commonwealth's literary competitions; this illustrates how the Commonwealth builds on work at the local level by providing international avenues for artistic development and recognition. The Best First Book awards of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize help promote new talent internationally, even as the overall competition helps sustain a tradition of excellence among writers. The Commonwealth Short Story Competition gives amateur writers a platform for their work and helps them break into the literary market, which can be difficult, particularly in those countries with limited literary traditions.

### *Creating sustainable audiences*

Limited markets are not unique to the literary arts. Kenya has a strong tourism-driven crafts market, but few outlets for contemporary visual arts. Moreover, the traditional supporters of these artists are expatriates, not locals. To address this, the Kuona Trust complements its work to improve artists' practice with activities that educate audiences and build support for the visual arts. As the Trust points out, 'the visual arts scene cannot survive without encouraging and developing a local audience for the visual arts'. The Kenya Performing Arts Group (K-PAG) also proactively encourages and cultivates audiences as a natural extension of its work to support the long-term development and professionalisation of the arts.

### *Sustaining culture and tradition*

Culture is dynamic; as traditions are passed down they come into contact, or even compete, with other influences. The globalisation of mass culture is seen as a threat to indigenous expression and values. One response has been intentional promotion of local cultures, as in the Pacific, where every four years the region's cultural practitioners gather for the Festival of Pacific Arts to foster respect and understanding of each other's cultures in a changing context. But the organisers have found that more is needed to 'encourage the dynamic transmission and transformation of culture and creativity'.

## **Building cross-cultural understanding**

The very practices and traditions that separate groups can be used to increase understanding. The UK-based Triangle Arts Trust and the Kuona Trust have seen how international collaborations between artists and institutions can 'encourage understanding between cultures in an organic and unforced way'.

In South Africa, Artscape Theatre Centre brings together performers from different backgrounds as part of a strategy to counter the legacy of apartheid's divisions. The Collaborations project goes beyond performance to include working with students, their parents and teachers on conflict resolution and cultural awareness.

By tracing the roots of their country's various cultural traditions, school children in Trinidad and Tobago have developed a greater understanding of their common bonds. An ongoing collaboration between a London theatre and an NGO in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, will help youth in the two cities develop an understanding of each other's cultures, which they will dramatise for audiences in both places.

Since 1983, Europe's longest running festival of world cultures has helped Londoners experience other cultures. The Music Village's organisers emphasise the provision of authoritative and contextual information to help audiences make sense of the showcased traditions.

Although the Commonwealth Essay Competition promotes language development, creative thinking and writing skills, it also encourages global citizenry, and helps, as the 2004 top-winner from Singapore has said, 'amplify the worldview' of participating students.

Creative expression can help people understand the perspectives of others, be it adults in Bangalore learning how children see their rights by reading their comic books or mainstream audiences in Australia who gain insights into indigenous language and culture through watching a Pitjantjatjara-English production and then going online to learn more from an associated website.

### Professional development

Cross-cultural collaborations help develop professional skills. The British and Malawian performers who staged a Malawian production in London under the auspices of Bilimankhwe Arts learned practical skills from each other's theatre traditions. The Commonwealth Foundation's arts exchanges and those of the Triangle Trust achieve similar ends for guest artists and their hosts.

### Value added

Adding a cross-cultural dimension can make the ordinary extraordinary. What sets the Commonwealth Writers' Prize apart from most other literary prizes is international nature of its judging and administration. Most literary competitions judge merit within their cultural context, but this one takes an international approach, and helps 'the arts travel beyond their cultures', as the 2006 Best Book overall winner, Kate Grenville, has noted.