Learning Exchange on arts, culture and conflict transformation for people based in arts and culture spaces

June 27 – 29, 2018

Questions

Welcome to Day 1: Starting points for our conversation. Words, stories, highlights and cautions.

This is our chance to get oriented, be open about our experiences, our questions, and our concerns relating to the nexus of arts, culture, and conflict transformation. We don’t want to take anything for granted or make assumptions, so on Day 1 we will explore what key terms mean in different cultural contexts, exchange stories and examples that raise up the positive power of arts and culture in conflict transformation, and also explore the limitations and risks of peacebuilding through arts and culture.

Topic 1: Meanings of key terms in different cultural and institutional contexts

As participants in the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation learning exchange, we come from every continent. We are working as peacebuilders on the ground, as scholars, as funders, as activists and advocates, and as policymakers. To a large degree, our ability to be effective depends on others in this “eco-system.”

We share many values, goals and ethical commitments. At the same time, we speak different languages, and our work reflects different beliefs about
how to build peace and how the arts and culture can be engaged to best effect. We bring different knowledge from our cultures, and have had different kinds of education and enjoy different levels of access to resources. Both our commonalities and differences make this space a fertile terrain for learning. This platform is a unique opportunity to think together about strengthening our own work and about strengthening our field.

To begin, we’d like to develop a shared understanding of our different understandings of the words used to frame this learning exchange. As conveners, we hope that this will help us communicate better over the next three days – and beyond!

With this in mind, please answer some or all of these questions:

Questions

1. What comes to mind when you hear the words “art” and “culture”? What do these words mean in your practice and in your part of the world?
2. In your understanding, are arts, culture and peacebuilding connected at all? If yes, in what ways?
3. Given our different understandings of the meanings of words related to our work, and different assumptions:
   - How could a global network or organization help people working in this field communicate more effectively with each other?
   - How could a global network or organization help people working in this field communicate more effectively with funders and policy-makers?
4. Are there words or concepts we should avoid, when working in your region of the world?

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**Topic 2: Stories and examples that demonstrate the positive power of arts and culture in the transformation of conflict**

In the borderland between human suffering and human possibility artists, cultural workers, justice-seekers and peacebuilders act with courage, beauty, compassion and power with the intention to make a less violent, most just and more vibrant world.
Here is one inspiring story of arts, culture and conflict transformation: Lost African Tribe Still Living in India Today. Please watch it and answer the questions below.

Questions

1. It is common to hear people say the “arts are powerful” in social change. Would you agree with this statement? If yes, please share an example that illustrates the peacebuilding power of the arts. If not, why not?
2. In your experience in peacebuilding, are there particular peacebuilding challenges that you think can best be addressed through the arts and cultural forms and processes? Which peacebuilding challenges? And why?
3. Who should hear your stories about the power of arts and culture in peacebuilding? How might a global or regional supportive structure help you and others get the word out?

Topic 3: The risks of doing harm in the arts, culture and conflict transformation field … and how to minimize them!

In the Brandeis/Theatre Without Borders collaboration Acting Together on the World Stage, stories told by theatre artists and leaders of ritual working in zones of violent conflict revealed six different risks of harm:

- The risk of engaging in ‘epistemic violence’ – injury to local ways of knowing, cultural practices, forms of expression
- The risk of worsening divisions between conflicting groups
- The risk of re-traumatizing individuals and communities that have suffered from violence
- The risk of undermining artistic integrity
- The risk of creating or perpetuating injurious power dynamics
- The risks to the safety artists, cultural workers and project participants working in contexts of government repression, paramilitary formations and polarized citizenries

If you are interested, please check out the handout “Minimizing Risks of Harm” for an initial list of ideas about how to minimize these risks.

Questions
1. Have these or other risks of harm emerged in your practice or in work you’ve observed? How have they been addressed?
2. What are some of the pitfalls to avoid in peacebuilding work that involves the arts and/or cultural practices?
3. What kinds of offerings (resources, events, programs, etc.) could assist you, your colleagues, and partners avoid these pitfalls and minimize risks of harm?

**Topic 4: A Cautionary Tale**

*Edited by Cindy Cohen from James Thompson’s essay “Incidents of Cutting and Chopping”*

In October 2000, twenty-seven Tamil boys and young men were killed at the Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre in the hill country area of Sri Lanka while being held as surrendered child soldiers. Most died from cut or burn wounds, in all probability inflicted by local Sinhalese. Although some perpetrators were convicted years later, an investigation of the massacre ultimately led to previous convictions of the perpetrators being quashed and the exoneration of those who were responsible for the welfare of the young men.

Three months before these "incidents of cutting and chopping," as they were referred to by a survivor, an applied theatre project took place in Bindunuwewa Rehabilitation Centre (BRC), run by a team of applied theatre practitioners led by Dr. James Thompson, of the UK, and including four Sri Lankan colleagues. In perhaps the most courageous assessment of an arts and social transformation project that exists in the field, Dr. Thompson concluded that it is possible that the theatre workshops and the ways in which government and intergovernmental agencies represented them to various constituencies may have contributed to the massacre and to a narrative about the government's good intentions that was part of the case for exoneration.

Importantly, Dr. Thompson’s assessment does not focus on the activities of the workshops and performances. It emphasizes how the fact of the workshop was, in a sense, itself a performance – presented to audiences including the international community. The BRC provided a site from which the goodwill of the government could be proved in international arenas. The existence of foreign consultants in liaison with international agencies further strengthened the impression that the government was part of the international mainstream, pursuing projects governed by accepted human
Lessons

- In places of violent conflict and deep divisions, no one is 'just an artist.' In the midst or aftermath of violence, the "meaning" of an arts-based or cultural intervention can easily be appropriated by agencies, governments or other players in service of their own agendas and the images of themselves they seek to promote. Artists need to be educated to survey the range of entities with an interest in their work, understand the interests and agendas of those agencies, and build relationships with their staff so that they can discuss the ways in which the work will be represented to various audiences, ranging from local on-lookers to the international community. This kind of awareness is rarely incorporated into the education or training of artists and cultural workers.[1]

- Artistic and cultural processes are often empowering and engender a sense of agency among vulnerable people. This can be very useful in leveling the playing field and building capacities needed for reconciliation. Care must be taken, however, to address how such newfound power can be wielded without putting participants at risk.
of harming themselves when they re-enter the "real world" with various kinds of power arrayed against them

- James Thompson: "It is not good enough to understand the discourses that operate within a particular location, but we must also understand who is using them, for what ends and in what circumstances. When someone urges the support of human rights in a crisis situation, we need to ask what claims they are making for their own actions and who is excluded within their conception of rights. If someone proposes a project for victims of a conflict, who has decided who the victims will be and which of them will receive what type of support?"


Questions:

1. How can the education and training of artists, cultural workers, agency staff and government officials working in zones of deep divisions and violent conflict be made aware of the dangers illuminated in this cautionary tale?

2. What kind of organization, or agency, could be effective in transforming dynamics among local, national and intergovernmental players that contribute to tragedies like the one James Thompson describes in his courageous writing?

Welcome to Day 2: Imagining a powerful arts, culture, and conflict transformation field. Opportunities for collaboration, exchange, and learning.

We have established that there is a powerful potential when arts, culture and peacebuilding intersect. What are those specific contributions that arts and culture make to the challenges we encounter in our peacebuilding practice?

And what does it look like when this happens not ‘by chance’, but purposefully, with intentional collaboration between peacebuilders and artists?

How and when do opportunities for collaboration, learning, and exchange happen?
Topic 5: Important Assets of the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field

In planning structures and processes in support of the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field, IMPACT wants to be sure that we are aware of what resources already exist.

What do you see as five of the most important existing assets of the arts, culture and conflict transformation field? [Even one idea in response to this question would be helpful! And you can come back later in the day or tomorrow to add more if you wish.]

As you answer this question, please think about particular people, programs, organizations, or other resources that only do great work, but also contribute to the field as a whole. You might mention, for instance:

- grassroots groups doing particularly effective work in their communities that document and share their approach with others;
- particular artist-peacebuilders, cultural workers, policy-makers, researchers;
- training, fellowship and exchange programs;
- degree programs;
- important books, films, blogs, journals, radio or tv shows, websites or platforms;
- existing networks within this field of overlapping with it;
- conferences, festivals or other gatherings that occur on a regular basis; and
- funders

Please feel free to mention your own organizations or programs.

Topic 6: The contributions of arts and culture to different peacebuilding challenges: Bright spots and challenges

All around the world, artists, cultural workers and peacebuilders undertake initiatives to increase justice and vitality, and decrease violence. We are at the forefront of addressing many peacebuilding challenges – such as countering violent extremism; refugee resettlement; the extreme inequalities at local, national and global levels; the degradation of the
climate; unresolved legacies of past violence; gender-based violence; and more. Sometimes our work tackles an issue head-on, sometimes we work indirectly.

In order to contribute to a fuller picture of both the strengths and needs of the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field, please respond to the survey at the following link before discussing the questions below: https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/6STCBDN

Questions

1. Thinking of its socio-political impact, how would you describe the strengths of your work in arts, culture and conflict transformation?
2. Thinking of its artistry and cultural power, how would you describe the strengths of your work, in arts, culture and conflict transformation?
3. How would you describe the challenges you face, including the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of your work?
4. What opportunities do you see emerging for your work?

Topic 7: Strengthening collaborations among peacebuilders, artists, and cultural workers

At a recent gathering of experts in monitoring and evaluation in the arts-for-social-change and peacebuilding-and-the-arts field, several important commonalities were identified:

- Both art-for-social-change and peacebuilding-and-the-arts require people to be responsive to dynamic, complex contexts
- Both fields are concerned about changes in people, relationships, institutions, policies, and systems
- Both are attentive to potential harms and keen to minimize them
- In both art-making and peacebuilding, much of the transformative potential is found in the process, in many instances more than in products or outcomes.

At the same time, there are important differences between many artists and many peacebuilders. For instance, peacebuilding organizations tend to operate—and evaluate—based on pre-articulated goals and plans. Many arts-based initiatives, in contrast, emphasize the emergent quality of their practice: the issues and goals emerge from the practice itself, rather than from pre-determined plans. While many peacebuilding organizations
tend to focus on changes in the sociopolitical context, arts organizations are at least as attentive to the aesthetic quality of what is produced on stage, created on the canvas, performed at the poetry slam, or presented on the screen.

Questions:

1. Which of these two positions do you agree with more strongly? And why?
   - If artists want to collaborate with peacebuilders, they should prioritize the peacebuilding goals of the project and not worry too much about artistic quality.
   - If peacebuilders want to work with artists, they should recognize that artistic and cultural integrity and quality are the sources of arts’ power for social transformation.

2. How should a global or regional organization or infrastructure support artists and peacebuilders to negotiate differences in priorities (when they exist)?

3. How might the infrastructure support peacebuilders and artists to better work together as equal partners?

Topic 8: Working with issues of power within our field

Both artists and peacebuilders are interested in the power of creativity, and in challenging the norms that equate power solely with its destructive, dominate face. At the same time, we recognize that we can’t escape the legacies and the current manifestations of destructive power that affect our ability to create trusting and trustworthy collaborations across our positions (in the global North or South) and in the arts/culture/conflict transformation ecosystem (in local grassroots organizations, in universities, in foundations, in policy-making organizations, etc.)

The questions below are designed to help us acknowledge these differences directly and think together what they mean for our field, for ethical relationships across these potential fault lines, and how we can build the trusting and trustworthy relationships fieldbuilding will require.

If you wish, read “IMPACT Guiding Values” in the resources section – an attempt to address some of these questions at the beginning of this initiative. We are eager to hear your thoughts, and wonder if you have suggestions to improve it, and also if you know of other statements that address similar issues.
Questions

1. From your position in the global South or North, what do you wish others in our field (our eco-system) would understand about your work? What would you like them to understand about:
   - your work’s strengths?
   - its constraints?
   - its demands?
   - the dilemmas you face?
2. From your particular position in the Arts, Culture and Conflict eco-system – as a researcher, policymaker, funder, artist, cultural worker, activist, peacebuilder, and/or scholar/practitioner – what would you like others in the eco-system to understand about your work? What would you like them to understand about the constraints of your position?
3. How might those positioned differently in the field support you to do more effective work?
4. Have you found ways to build relationships of reciprocity across these institutional boundaries and the hierarchies and power dynamics often associated with them?
5. Could the structure of a field-building entity, or the activities it undertakes, help build trust and trustworthiness amongst different players in our eco-system? If so, how?

Welcome to Day 3: An infrastructure for the field: structures and priorities. Tapping our resources

These are some of the questions we’ll be exploring today in Topics 8, 9, 10 and 11. Are there other questions or topics on your mind? If so, please enter these into the discussion space here.

What will it take to take the field of arts, culture, and conflict transformation to the next level? Today we seek to be as concrete as possible, identifying priority tasks for a regional or global arts, culture, and conflict transformation organization. What forms would this take? And what resources (of all types) would be needed? What concerns or ethical dilemmas does the thought of such an organization raise for us?

Please respond to these questions in the four topics below.

**Topic 9: Networks, Communities of Practice, Systems of Influence**
As we think about developing a supportive structure for the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field, it’s important to consider emerging ideas about how change happens in our highly connected world.

Meg Wheatley, a specialist in leadership and organizational change, believes that communities find their health and resilience by discovering the wisdom and wealth already present in their people, traditions and environment. In her article “Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale,” she develops the idea of ‘emergence’ – when people involved in local actions become connected to each other. That’s when local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more large-scale, comprehensive level.

She suggests a three-stage life-cycle of emergence:

**Emergence: Meg Wheatley**

- **Scattered Clusters**: Coalitions and alliances form. Essential for people finding like-minded others. Based on self-interest, have fluid membership.
- **Hub-and-Spoke**: Self-organized – share common work, provide mutual support. Shared commitment; rapid development and exchange of new practices.
- **Multi-Hub**: Appear suddenly with real power and influence. Pioneering efforts by groups at the periphery become the new norm. Policy debates include the pioneers as new leaders, wisdom keepers.
- **Core + Periphery**: Systems of influence.
**Stage one: Networks.** Networks are essential for people to find like-minded others. They usually are based on self-interest – people network together for their own benefit and to develop their own work. Membership is fluid, people move in and out of networks based on how much they personally benefit.

**Stage two: Communities of Practice.** When people in networks realize there is great benefit to being in relationship, they sometimes form communities of practice. People make commitments to be there for each other; they participate not only for their own needs, but to serve the needs of others. The focus extends to advance the field of practice and to share discoveries with wider audiences. Good ideas move rapidly amongst members, and new knowledge and practices are implemented quickly.

**Stage three: Systems of Influence.** In ways and times that are impossible to predict, a system that has real power and influence suddenly appears. Pioneering efforts that hovered at the periphery suddenly become the norm. The practices developed by courageous communities become the accepted standard. Policy and funding debates include the perspectives and experiences of these pioneers.

Wheatley argues that “emergence is the only way change really happens on this planet. And that is very good news.”

For a deeper exploration, please see “Using Emergence to Take Social Innovations to Scale” in the Additional Resource section. A different angle on the way power works in a world of decentralized networks can be found in a book called *The New Power*, by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms. A review of the book by David Brooks can be found in the Additional Resource section of this learning exchange.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think of Wheatley’s ideas about how change happens?
2. Are you part of, or aware of, any existing networks or communities of practice that would benefit by being in relationship with each other?
3. Could this thinking help in the design of a supportive structure for the field? If yes, how?

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**Topic 10: Priority tasks for a regional or global arts, culture and conflict transformation organization**
Imagine the arts, culture and conflict transformation field, supported by structures and processes designed to help it make increasingly effective contributions to the transformation of conflict.

Imagine, for instance, a fully staffed virtual archive, where, young artists and cultural leaders from zones of violent conflict and ongoing oppression can learn about how opposing communities are engaging through the arts in other parts of the world, about how artists working in a variety of media are addressing conflict in their own neck of the woods, about where they can find mentors and propose conversation groups on issues that challenge and excite them.

There might be real resource centers as well: physical spaces where artists and peacebuilders could meet, exchange ideas, view films, offer trainings, etc. These ‘anchor institutions’ would arrange for the documentation of practice in their regions, and develop educational and training materials from this documentation.

Imagine funding and other resources for peacebuilding initiatives based in arts and culture increasing every year, as the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation sustains a smart, effective communications initiative aimed at funders and policy-makers in different regions of the world.

Imagine being part of a trusting and interconnected eco-system, where artists, peacebuilders, researchers, policy-makers and funders trust each other and collaborate to great effect. Imagine progressive businesses supporting arts-based initiatives that address the underlying causes of conflicts in their communities – including poverty, environmental degradation, and unresolved legacies of past violence.

Imagine working with others to develop shared understandings of what comprises excellence in this work, and a repertoire of recognized assessment and evaluation approaches designed to account for both aesthetic and socio-political effects, adapted to different cultural contexts, conflict dynamics, and kinds of community engagements with arts and culture.

Questions:

1. Imagine being the secretary-general of the new Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation alliance. What goals would you propose to your steering committee for the first five years?
2. What are your cautions, worries or concerns about a global infrastructure for the arts, culture and conflict transformation field? How should they be addressed?

3. Think back to yesterday’s discussion on strengths, opportunities, challenges and obstacles. How might a regional or global infrastructure (network, resource center, advocacy capacity, etc.) support you to build on these strengths, embrace these opportunities, face these challenges and/or overcome these obstacles? How might that infrastructure help you, your organization, your community, or the field,
   1. build on strengths?
   2. embrace emerging opportunities?
   3. face challenges and overcome obstacles that limit our effectiveness?

**Topic 11: Forms that such an organization might take:** network(s), movement, membership organization, coalition, centers with regional hubs, etc.

Members of the IMPACT Steering Committee worked in small teams to explore possible configurations for an infrastructure for the field. This document includes summaries of their research into three possible configurations:

- A central organization with regional nodes
- A membership organization
- Multiple working groups focused on particular issues and opportunities

We are posting here just parts of the summaries of the reports of these three working groups. If you would like to see IMPACT’s assessment of the pros and cons of each model, please take a look at the full summary reports, in: “Exploring Possible Scenarios for a Platform for the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation Field,” in the Resources section of this learning exchange.

In the end, we are thinking that our recommendations likely will include elements of all of these configurations, and perhaps others as well. Some people have suggested that what we need is a movement; it was demand from the streets that gave rise to academic programs in Women’s Studies and Environmental Studies. Others have suggested that we start with a small tightly knit consortium of universities, cultural institutions and
peacebuilding organizations that focuses first on building and staffing the virtual and real resource centers.

**SCENARIO REPORT: Central Organization with Regional Nodes.**

**Summary:**

This networked organization would include headquarters consisting of some or all of the following: an administrator, research coordinator, IT specialist, media and outreach coordinator, editor, and library curator. The headquarters would be linked to regional hubs around the world which would be drawn from the following: colleges and universities, centers or institutes within higher education institutions, arts based institutions, activist institutions or organizations. Regional hubs would be linked to Individual scholars, practitioners, cultural workers & activists. Governance would include the following: executive board, with executive director and board members who are artists, scholars, and policy makers experienced in the field; an advisory council made up of activist artists, cultural workers, directors of renowned arts based institutions, and eminent scholars; and informal relationships with a wide range of individual artists, scholars and activities, maintained through ties with specific members.

The network would include: an online platform of communication between headquarters, regional hubs and country contact points; a key resources database; and meeting spaces for collaboration, both virtual gatherings (webinars, learning community platforms) and physical meetings such as conferences and workshops.

**SCENARIO REPORT: Membership Organization/Draft 2**

**Summary:**

A membership organization can be configured in a number of ways. It might include individuals and/or organizations, institutions, collectives and/or other formal or informal groupings of people. It might have a physical home secretariat or, possibly, only an online administrative presence. It could be organized into a central (physical) administrative office with hubs based in various regions of the world that coordinate local convenings and actions. A membership organization would require some kind of investment (financial/dues; material resources; contributions of time and/or space for discussions, writing, assessment, virtual and/or in-person meetings, etc.) from members and a reward to those members as well.
Governance might include an executive director and assistant, communications and membership coordinators, and a board. Representation at the secretariat and on the board would involve individuals from diverse ethnic, gender-identity, geographical, professional (artists, policy makers, scholars, and so on) and socio-economic communities, and, potentially, with a variety of relationships to engagement with conflict transformation and the arts. This might include people from places with histories of or currently experiencing violent conflict, negotiators/mediators and policy-makers, as well as those at more of a remove.

**SCENARIO REPORT: WORKING GROUPS**

A working group is envisioned as a team of people or entities tasked with addressing a specified goal or situation by combining and activating their expertise, knowledge, perspectives, relationships and networks. A single working group or set of working groups would not be a feasible or sustainable organizational model for IMPACT (one reason being that the structural needs of IMPACT are not necessarily aligned with the characteristics—fluidity, porousness, collectiveness, time-flexible, iterative, experimental—that are assets of the best working groups), but could serve as a principal action element within a central organization based on a cluster of nodes/hubs, a membership organization, or some other overarching structure. The central organization could launch a working group wherever/whenever it concluded that focused attention, multi-disciplinary expertise, and targeted resources could help to address an organizational challenge, critical topic in the field, or situation of conflict. Multiple working groups could operate simultaneously, subject to the central organization’s capacity to provide necessary guidance, oversight, governance, and support. In an organization where universities are presumed to be the centerpiece, a network of working groups could help to mitigate against the fact and perception of such characteristics as bureaucratic, hierarchical, elitist, and slow-changing—characteristics that are presumed to come with university leadership.

EmcArts is a national service organization that works with individuals, organizations and communities to respond to complex challenges through collaboration, experimentation, and artistic practices. For more than a decade EmcArts has used a working group strategy that they
call *Innovation Labs* in ways that could be instructive for IMPACT’s incorporation of working groups into its infrastructure.

Questions

1. What organizational structure(s) do you think would best meet the needs of our large and diverse field, and also be sustainable?
2. What existing organizations, networks, initiatives, etc., could a global infrastructure for the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field build upon?
3. What are some well-functioning global or regional networks or organizations with missions similar to what we are imagining? Why do you think they work well? What can we learn from them?

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**Topic 12: Additional questions and wrap-up**

Thanks to all of the participants for the quality of your attention and the thoughtfulness of your comments. As co-conveners, we have definitely learned a lot, and we hope that you have as well. We are leaving this space for questions that have emerged during our three days in conversation, and for your final thoughts and reflections.

Questions

1. What questions would you like more time to discuss – either here, on this platform, or in future convenings?
2. Are there sectors of our field, or voices of particular groups, that you found missing from this exchange? We can make a point of seeking input in other ways, and correcting for omissions in upcoming future virtual and real conversations
3. What are you taking with you from this learning exchange?
4. What final reflections would you like to share with the co-conveners and organizers? (We welcome advice, complaints, offers of support, constructive critique, etc. about both the substance and the process of this exchange. It’s all helpful!!!)