Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation: Daily summary

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

Session summary
Thanks to everyone for another vibrant day of debate and sharing ideas!

Discussion on Day 2 focused on the contribution that art and culture can make to peacebuilding, including addressing critical challenges. There was a particular focus on the forms and limits of collaborations among peacebuilders, artists, and cultural groups. But there was also critical questioning of issues of power relations in both the art and peacebuilding fields.

All participants have raised very important issues, and in an effort to summarise today’s discussion we have pulled together some of the key points raised to give you an idea of the conversations that are currently taking place. We apologise in advance if we could not incorporate everyone’s insights. You can still continue to review and add comments to each of these threads throughout the week. Many thanks to our facilitators for leading these sessions and for your active role in participating in the discussions.
Names of those who made comments have been removed to protect participants’ privacy.
Welcome

Several significant comments were made and exchanges took place in response to questions posed in the Welcome to Day 2 section. If you didn’t participate in this exchange, it might be worth your time to check it out. Participants here came from Cambodia, the US, Cyprus, Kenya, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Serbia, Switzerland, and El Salvador.

Key points:

- In Kenya for instance, when peacebuilders are faced with a matter that is too sensitive to address or talk about, art is used to break the ice and barriers between groups. When Kenya experienced violence following disputed elections in 2007, images that were taken by peacebuilders were used as a tool to mobilize local and international actors to take action.

- An activist I met in Sri Lanka some time ago shared something I found rather insightful: He said that peace cannot happen in abstract and that it needs a space to survive. His reflection upon their past programs, and noted that the inter-ethnic relationships initiated through programs that worked for peace through another space-such as business collaborations between ethnicities-worked well and sustained on their own, while the relationships initiated during workshops and seminars faded out after a while. The arts do a fantastic job of creating that space: it space it creates for interactions is an in-between space that exists at different levels: in-between politics and everyday life, real and imagined, free and curated.

- I am from Taranaki, New Zealand and a village of peace, known as Parihaka. We became a community of nonviolent resistance in 1867, and have continued to live this legacy today. My meeting house is replete with many types of art; all depicting a different message of peace - inspired by the Maori peace traditions. The exchanges that can occur vary at times, they are also very
organic; the gifting process is important, the readiness of the meeting house, as well as the integrity of the artist. Many visitors come and learn the history of the traditions with the art, as the rituals can be artistic as well as religious. The role of the community is to retain the knowledge of the art, the artist and how it relates to the ideology behind our traditions. A challenge that is profound, given the type of cultural deficit the Maori people are in. Revitalising the culture, the message of peace as well as the different types of art; is a typical part of building our emancipatory discourse.

• Another Hello from Cambodia, I am Sotheary YIM, a psychologist and I recently give another title to myself a Peace Activist. I am, in the recent years highly value changes that happened through arts. Poem, Music, exhibition, forum theatre, film screening was used during my latest works with survivors of server human rights violation including sexual and gender-based violence, torture, etc. With these kinds of works, I was also being able to connect the projects and dialogues about the topics to younger generation. Intensive dialogues happen after the creative forms of arts are taken to dealing with conflict and peace building works. From my experience, younger generations reported me that they like to learn the history from the creative arts than a history book or sitting in a lecture. They could relate better to the topic.

• In our work at artasfoundation we often see ourselves as intermediaries or curators, who (1.) make sure that the project can make sense in terms of peacebuilding, conflict sensitvity, etc., (2) build a bridge to the communities the artists can work with and provide some temporal continuity, (3) assist the artists and hold a space in which they can unfold their work with much freedom (that is, hold a space for art, that has as little intentionality as possible).
**Topic 5: The contributions of arts and culture to different peacebuilding challenges: Bright spots and challenges**

We asked participants to think about the peacebuilding challenges that art and culture can help overcome. Some participants noted the capacity of art in bringing people together despite societal divisions. A number of participants also underlined the potential of mass media, seen as a communication art, to create social capital and allow the integration of a larger part of the civil society. But other participants mentioned some limitations, including the lack of funding, the lack of interest in art initiatives or the strength of ethnic divisions.

**Key points:**

- “I agree that the arts can contribute the social change a lot. Our organization is using social healing approach for peace building and our healing material consists of painters and poets. One of the healing sessions is talk about story telling to share what happened in the past.”
- “A Syrian director in Beirut struggled for month then he put all his savings on a play that he directed in an old ill-equipped theater. Unfortunately this "outsider"'s efforts were not welcomed by many in Lebanese theatrical community. He was harshly criticized, reflecting the growing social racism towards refugees”
- “I passionately believe that mass media, as an example of the communicating arts, should be used primarily for creating social capital. It should support-benefit and empower a global society by including all members in the communication process (especially the socially marginalized), primarily through humanitarian means.”
- “We never thought of any socio-political impact. But the kids started drawing about the environment of war blood conflict and destruction around them [...] but it was humble and limited due to our limited resources and lack of even
semi-professional channels of marketing and promotion. A strength that leads us to nowhere without any concrete outcomes or outputs”.

**Topic 6: Strengthening collaborations among peacebuilders, artists, and cultural workers**

The second thread asked participants to think about the paradox between the similarities of art and peacebuilding philosophies, especially regarding the search for change, and at the same time their different priorities. This led to the issue of the prioritization of peacebuilding goals or of the artistic quality of the project. Most of the participants agreed on the idea that artistic and cultural integrity and quality are the sources of arts’ power for social change. But, in some cases, artistic integrity and quality can be distancing rather than collaborative and inclusive. In terms of precautions, some participants also highlighted the importance of paying attention to the values of the artist on one side and the independence of the project from political agenda on the other side.

**Key points:**

- “Another key component in striking the balance between artistic integrity and solid peace building, are the composition of groups and team-building: putting together a project group, inviting/connecting artists and peace builders, the "language barriers" need to be raised, respect between the groups needs to be established, and common principles to be laid out.”

- “If we want to harness some potentially strong synergies, then yes a global infrastructure should support peacebuilders and artists to work as equal partners, making the most of their different approaches, considerations, and values. The challenge would be in lifting the notion that there is one singular standard for success or excellence in peacebuilding, art, or art for peace. A best approach might be to engage in meaningful dialogue and offer tools and
strategies to help consider different lenses in understanding aesthetic engagement.”

• “Quality is essential. In our case, because we are a school, the quality of education is more important than the quality of the artistic outputs. But we definitely need both - good education and good outputs - to be credible among the local communities.”.

• “What I love most about Arts is that it is able to communicate what people are afraid of or rather fear communicating. In Peacebuilding, you might find that there are certain words that peace builders would not be able to say to a certain group or community, then this is where Arts comes in and the message the peacebuilders intended to pass across reaches the target audience through Arts effectively.”.

**Topic 7: Working with issues of power within our field**

In this section we asked participants to focus on the issues of power relations (especially regarding the Global South and North) in art and peacebuilding fields, looking at the way the affect their work. We also asked for strategies to address power imbalances. Some participant were concerned that art and peacebuilding approaches recreate or even increase existing power imbalances. Some therefore advocated for creating structures and organizations built upon trust and more equality among actors.

*Key points:*

• “The structure of a field-building entity, or the activities it undertakes may help build trust and trustworthiness amongst different players in our eco-system but not always - due for sure to the dynamics of power and unequal access to resources that threaten to reinforce rather than transform current inequalities.”

• “I get anxious about the ways some projects seem to reinforce unequal power dynamics at the broad level (national level, etc), even while informed by
seemingly deep trust-worthy connections at the interpersonal level. As two specific examples: I recently saw a very creative collaborative artistic project that aimed to reexamine multispecies colonialism in a particular location in South America but which ended up (I think inadvertently) reifying indigenous people as "animal-like" and "closer to nature" (thus reanimating, not critically examining, really problematic stereotypes)."

• “A global infrastructure for arts, cultural work and conflict transformation could be well poised to support peacebuilding in situations with destructive power and inequality. Coming from a peacebuilding background based in bi and multi-lateral international development, there are a few crucial areas where such a network can be a huge asset for developing a more equitable ecosystem.”

• “For us or at least for me, building relationships "across institutional boundaries and the hierarchies and power dynamics often associated with them" is so difficult and hard. It means contacts, insight, the big brothers, projects/programs and money, power struggle, with me or against me, part of the team or outside the team, wars western countries and international CSOs...which is which, and it means so many other seen and unseen lines for me to figure out”.