Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation: Daily summary

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

Session summary

Thanks to everyone who participated in the first day of our learning exchange on Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation.

We have had excellent participation with over 65 participants joining in from across the globe! Participants have added some 120 comments so far (and counting).

Today’s discussion focused on the definition of the key terms in different cultural and institutional contexts as well as the exchange of stories and examples that demonstrate the positive power of arts and culture in the transformation of conflict. We also explored the risks of doing harm in the arts, culture and conflict transformation field and ways to minimize those risks. Finally, we considered an example of what can go tragically wrong in Arts, Culture and Conflict interventions, and ways we, as a field, might address the underlying issues.

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 that we could not incorporate everyone’s insights. You can still continue to review and add comments to each of these threads throughout the week, and you are welcome to contribute summary comments on the PeaceDirect platform itself. Many thanks to our
guest experts for leading these sessions and for your active role in facilitating the discussions.
Names of those who made comments have been removed to protect participants' privacy.

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

This first session triggered the most comments and discussions. We asked participants to examine the meanings of the words arts, culture, peacebuilding and conflict transformation and the relationships among them. Some participants explored and questioned the universal dimension of artistic expression, and another interesting thread compared the concepts of arts and culture, as these are understood in different cultural contexts. In addition, we considered the implications of referring to the arts as ‘tools’ for peacebuilding purposes, with differing points of view on this topic. [We’ll continue to explore this on Day 2] A number of participants also underlined the role of art as a resource for communication, likely to reduce tensions by allowing a better understanding of the other cultures.

**Key points:**

- “Often dance is referred to as “a universal language” and this is why it is potentially useful in peacebuilding. Through my practice, I have grown to think of dance is “a universal means of expression,” or one that continues to have many different languages.

- “Culture in the sense of human mankind. The more you can increase a cultural consciousness (a deep understanding of cultural roots not the populistic, polarizing and nationalistic use of the arts) the less arguments have those who call for conflict”

- “I think arts are a means of understanding the "others" culture, in depth. It is a means to defy stereotypes and mistrust in this dark world. In fact, communication and understanding via arts could be the antidote to hatred.”
• "In the Pacific, where I am from, art is an important part of culture in many places. It is a medium through which stories are passed down through generations and which "discusses" traditional practice. Learnings are passed down through storytelling, through dance and song or even through special drawings and carvings. Art is also how people identify their ancestry... The most vulnerable are women and young people, especially in patrilineal societies, where their voices are not factored in decision making spaces but are most affected....In this context, art provides a safe space for the vulnerable to express their concerns and to those that are recipients, it is hearing an alternative perspective of something in a non-threatening way."

• "This "universal language", is an idea that comes up a lot. As in any other language also, I guess there are as many interpretations as those who perceive. Starting with the best-case-scenario where one audience-individual connects with a certain aspect or fragment within the artwork, where something resonates and the connection arises [...] and leading to something "ambiguous", which allows a different perspective."

• "In the context of art & peacebuilding, "culture" could refer to the specific way, in which a society shapes the relations between people, or people and their environment. Thus, culture encompasses a society's specific ways of interpreting and ordering reality, and of the corresponding values, norms, and expected behaviour. Therefore: While building on the culture they belong to, artists (and works of art) often challenge the norms and values of their culture. Thus art can be a source of cultural change."

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

The second thread asked participants to think about the power of art in social change and the potential capacity of art to better answer to several peacebuilding challenges. The participants agreed on the potential of change that art brings to issues and
experiences of identity, but also expressed concerns about the possible boundaries that can result from this process. The importance of artists making long-term commitments to communities was also a theme that recurred.

Key points:

- “The process of song writing music together seems to be important to participants’ connection to each other, suggesting that joint *creation* of music has a deeper impact than shared musicianship/making music together. We reflect a lot on the role of identity, acknowledging that people have several identities while the conflict places the emphasis on ethnic/religious identity only….Our long-term presence and the quality of education are central to the success of the program.”

- "I have spent the past few weeks in South Africa, where I have had the privilege of encountering Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company in Cape Town…I particularly find their work in the South African community of Barrydale inspiring. There, they made a seven year commitment to collaborating on annual productions in the community in ways that linked divided parts of the town and drew attention to positive ways that environmental and conservation goals could be met."

- “Certain challenges are best addressed using art. An instance is a "guarded government" that censors media and people's freedom of speech. Art has been used to address such challenges - everyone wakes up to graffiti on street walls!"

- “In my experience, a peacebuilding challenge that can be addressed through arts and culture is building trust and, related to this, empathy. Arts and culture are key in these processes because they are human processes.”

- “There is a danger in creating/revitalizing identities with rigid boundaries. However, in my experience, peoples who are in constant danger of being erased by the nation-state (as is the case with many Indigenous peoples in the
United States), are pushing back by revitalizing their language, culture, and strengthening their identity as Indigenous communities”.

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

In this session we asked participants to focus on the risks associated with peacebuilding approaches that use arts and culture based approaches. The participants highlighted the necessity to give importance to the local context and dynamics, and in particular to avoid reinforcing patterns of dominance and hegemony. Further to this was an emphasis on investing enough time and a real presence in order for the initiative to be effective. An interesting discussion was begun comparing “Do No Harm” with “Minimizing Risks of Harm.”

**Key points:**

- “My advice is to take local contexts into consideration, respect local arts and oral history, listen to the locals' concerns and needs (once trust is built), adapt and learn. Sometimes we learn most from people we thought we are there to teach them something!”
- “The very same expression, or gesture, or artwork can have both beneficial and harmful effects. This seems inevitable, because it is impossible to operate entirely outside of existing structures, which are infused with patterns of dominance and exclusion.”
- “Lack of knowledge of the local dynamics between local norms of arts and its interactions with local cultures and the domestic socio-political lines”.

“One of the most insidious pitfalls in peacebuilding work that involves arts and cultural practices is what I loosely term as "art and culture parachuting" - lightening art and culture interventions, some of which are very well funded, that do not invest TIME in transforming the conflict”
Topic 4: A cautionary tale

The last topic was based on a case study extracted from James Thompson’s essay “Incidents of Cutting and Chopping”. This cautionary tale led to the reflection on the awareness of artists, cultural workers, agency staff and government officials working in zones of deep divisions and violent conflict of the dangers of these art initiatives. What kind of organization, or agency, could be effective in transforming dynamics among local, national and intergovernmental players that contribute to these kinds of tragedies? The participants, echoing lessons recognised the risk of appropriation of the "meaning" of an arts-based or cultural intervention by agencies, governments or other players in service of their own agendas. Therefore, it becomes necessary for artists to learn to understand the interests and agendas of those agencies.

Key points:

• “Write down the lessons learned as simple as possible (with adv suggestions and recommendations...etc.) and may be reflect them and/or put them in simple form like a short documentary, training guide, or/and new theory/diagram of Conflicts and Arts considering to enrich similiar world approach and experience ...distributing them widely to concerned international and regional programs/projects/CSOs/NGOs”

• “Artists, cultural workers, agency staff and government officials, can make great strides toward awareness by asking questions of those of informants and facilitators. However, I believe (and have experienced) that for the finite details one must go step(s) further ... listen with the eyes, and don't become confused by others' words. This is particularly true in societally pressurized situations where people are clinging on to life in some way. You as 'as outsider' merely become a conduit for other forces working behind and underneath your feet.”
• “When using culture, art and sports, I have learnt the importance of involving the purported perpetrators in order to help the victim who in most cases we get information from them and media as well. This has helped greatly in planning for community action theatre. It is also important to listen to the silent majority what they are saying without saying but can share information willingly or when motivated, these people are not among the opinion leaders, organised groups etc. but they carry very important information.”

• “The time used for preparation is essential in conflicts of long existence because there are so many layers to consider and so many ways to create new conditions to put these layers in deeper conflict. And in this preparation, to critically evaluate when to offer sustained access to creative processes and metaphorical language to a group and when to offer conflict transformation mechanisms in other forms.”