

# HOW DO THE ARTS CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABLE PEACE?

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## OVERVIEW

Creativity—the process of making something new—is essential to sustainable social, political and economic change. Artists offer unique insights into creative processes that have been shown to turn challenges into opportunities. The arts can contribute to peacebuilding aims and help fill a ‘blind spot’ in political science-focused approaches to security and development policy and practice. Based on a discussion of arts-based peacebuilding initiatives in diverse contexts from India to Palestine, Uganda, Lebanon, Ghana, Afghanistan, Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), the session devised recommendations on how to connect arts-based peacebuilders with donors and others in the traditional peacebuilding community who are well-placed to support this work. It was complemented by live performances by ten peacebuilding artists at an event that preceded the 2017 Forum.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Session participants identified six ways in which the arts serve peacebuilding goals. First, the arts can feed directly into peace processes by giving a voice to illiterate, oppressed and marginalized populations and increasing the relevance of peacebuilding aims. Community-based arts initiatives leverage attention-grabbing art and performance, and culturally relevant ritual to generate the political will for peace. Artistic forms of expression support formal negotiations and mediation, especially when verbal communication reaches its limits or the local population is uninformed about the process. In the CAR, Build Up exemplified how parallel, participatory, arts-based processes at the local level can inform national dialogue processes, and how the use of film and multimedia forms helped communicate to the grassroots the outcomes of the USAID-funded joint-border peace committee between Sudan and South Sudan. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, street theatre groups actively reached out to previously marginalized communities to bridge the persistent gap between policymakers and the grassroots. These examples stand in contrast to ineffective means of integrating local voices into and communicating the outcomes of peace processes, such as reading a peace accord over a loudspeaker.

Second, art can reduce fear in public spaces by activating the imagination in relation to people’s daily surroundings. Artists change public perceptions by changing public spaces. The murals painted by the Fearless Collective in Delhi, India in reaction to a 2012 gang rape, for example, galvanized a 400-person movement to dispel fear of sexual violence that has since grown into a worldwide network. Lebanese-led Clown Me In has been using theatre and storytelling in Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon and Greece to mitigate the challenges of displacement by providing opportunities for children to engage in meaningful play.

Third, because the arts stimulate different parts of the brain than those stimulated by rational thinking, arts-based programming often generates new ideas and approaches. Creative thinking has been applied strategically to help conflict-affected communities develop empathy for their adversaries and to solve problems non-violently. The Splendors of Dawn Poetry Foundation in Ghana and Nigeria uses poetry in peer mediation in schools, drawing on the topics of peace, reconciliation, restorative justice and trust. Research on creativity supports the idea that the arts unlock previously overlooked ideas for solutions of mutual benefit and stimulate the imagination in ways that motivate action.



Fourth, art can generate gainful employment and stimulate local economies. An example from northern Uganda shows that the production and sale of local crafts in Internally Displaced Persons camps supported livelihoods and decreased the need to travel through insecure areas to sell goods. Many women emerging from conflict experiences support themselves and their families through microenterprises based on traditional handicrafts that express and dignify their community's identity.

Fifth, artistic practices can heal, reconcile and lead to substantive reparations. Songs sung by women returning as refugees in northern Uganda helped community leaders identify psychological distress and provide assistance. Song and dance also helped women face the challenges associated with the slow and inconsistent return of children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army. Previously suppressed indigenous peacemaking ceremonies involving descendants of colonial settlers and aboriginal peoples led to the return of land that had been taken centuries before.

Sixth, the arts encourage and sustain non-violent resistance and activism. The arts are vehicles for protesting injustice and providing hope amid despair, which allows people to envisage and work towards better futures. Images, song and dance can bring deeper meaning to struggles against powerful political forces, becoming part of the public memory and collective narratives that shape identity.

Although not an exhaustive list, these six functions exemplify the relevance of the arts and culture to the peacebuilding and development fields. There is now a need for broader recognition and financial support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Generate opportunities for artists, policymakers, donors, philanthropists and scholars to come together and work across different sectors and countries.

- This will mean persuading sceptics and overcoming peacebuilders' past marginalization of the arts.
- The arts community and the peace and development communities must collaborate to remove the communication barriers that exist between them, establish strategic partnerships and increase funding.

### 2. Directly integrate arts programming into larger peacebuilding projects.

- The arts need to be recognized as assets and embedded from the start into peacebuilding interventions that, in contrast, typically lead with political science methodologies.

### 3. Translate the proposals, creative processes and outcomes of arts-based work into products that are relevant to policymakers and donors, such as cost-benefit analyses, theories of change and policy briefs.

- At the same time, however, policymakers and donors should work to increase their understanding of artistic methodologies and recognize that the value of the arts lies largely in new possibilities that may not be captured in preconceived frames.

