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REFLECTION PAPER ON CULTURE AND SUSTAINING PEACE



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A projection in Yangon, Myanmar, of the three-fingered salute by an anonymous artist.

Source: Myanmar Artists Protest Military Coup –www.artforum.com

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CAN ART CHANGE THE WORLD?

In his essay “The Kingdom of God is Within You; What is Art?”, Leo Tolstoy proposes that the purpose of art extends beyond mere pleasure and beauty. He argues that art plays a significant role in society, particularly in “educating people to union” by “uniting the most different people, (...) destroying separation”. Tolstoy asserts, “Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this.”ⁱ

Although art and culture play an integral role in peacebuilding, as they reflect the context and often what connects and divides people, this radical viewpoint might be difficult to accept for development, humanitarian and peacebuilding practitioners because it puts art at the centre of peacebuilding and thereby questions more ‘traditional’ ways peace is promoted. Moreover, it neglects the follow-up work towards peace required after shifting perceptions and feelings that lead to behaviour change. Systemic work is necessary to increase social justice and equity in societies. John Paul Lederach, a peace scholar and practitioner, proposes in *The Moral Imagination*ⁱⁱ that peacebuilding itself is art, in that it is a creative act. He refers to the capacity of art to create “recognizing turning points and possibilities” and to “generate constructive processes that transcend (...) destructive patterns”. JR, a French artist who pastes photos in enormous formats in the public space, explains in his book *Can art change the world?* that the transformative power of art to provoke social and political change lies in its capacity for community engagement, for example with marginalised groups, who through art can tell their stories in compelling, unconventional ways which question societal norms and injustice and provoke critical reflection.ⁱⁱⁱ

What do you think? Can art change the world? What is the transformative potential of the art? And more particularly, how can art support peace?

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has never questioned the transformative potential of culture for development in its

over 30-year-long engagement and support of arts and culture. Culture’s contribution to peace is underlined in the current SDC Culture and Development Policy, which puts forward the importance of arts and culture’s potential to support inclusion, intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. The SDC has committed itself to allocating 1% of the overall organisational budget to supporting arts and culture. While it promotes the support of arts and culture initiatives through different means, it also underlines the importance of cultural sensitivity, which is strongly linked to conflict sensitivity – a very important aspect to consider in all arts and culture projects aiming at supporting peace,^{iv} and for that matter non-arts and culture projects also.

The “Overview of the SDC’s support to artistic and cultural expression in the South and the East in 2022”, based on a survey covering most of the SDC’s cooperation offices, provides the reader with an impressive breadth of ways in which cultural projects have contributed to development and peace, with a particular focus on gender equality, leaving no one behind, and good governance. It is striking to see the emphasis on trust-building and social cohesion in the SDC’s cultural projects and programmes. This focus ranks first among the top ten fields of activity. Other areas include independent artists’ creative expression, inclusion of marginalised groups, and access to cultural life. Cultural and artistic exchanges, along with freedom of expression and civic space, also play a crucial role. All these efforts contribute to sustaining peace, a goal that stands prominently in the top ten. The reader is also invited to learn how arts and culture have promoted and contributed to peace in different contexts and phases of conflict around the world. It prompts reflection, especially on how arts and culture contribute to achieving the UN’s goals related to sustaining peace and advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agendas, among others. It raises questions on challenges and opportunities for promoting peace through arts and culture and shares ideas for leveraging the transformative power of the sector for peacebuilding. In doing so, it promotes wider recognition of its important role for the peace, humanitarian and development sectors and their contribution to a more just world and a healthier, safer planet.

SETTING THE GROUND FOR REFLECTION, CLARIFYING CONCEPTS

What do we mean concretely when we speak about culture and its potential for sustaining peace? It is helpful to start by clarifying terms before digging deeper.

Arts and Culture

Culture, as defined by UNESCO and the SDC, encompasses spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional aspects that define a society. **Art** is closely related to creative expression, conveying ideas and emotions. **The arts** encompass forms of expression like painting, acting, dancing, music, film, and literature. While cultural expression can be a manifestation of people's identity, it is more than anything a creative form of expressing one's thoughts and feelings. While the SDC defines culture broadly, in practice, it narrows its focus to art and the arts, including cultural heritage and practices, in its cultural work.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion can encompass many aspects and is sometimes used to refer to peace in contexts where peace is too sensitive to talk about. For this reflection, social cohesion refers to the glue that unifies different people in a society. It reflects the quality of relationships between individuals and groups in society as well as between people and institutions. According to Search for Common Ground, in a cohesive society, social relations are based on mutual trust and respect, equality and equity, and all groups feel they are recognised and participate in shaping their environment. Social cohesion requires all levels of society to actively and constantly commit to respecting and protecting human rights, increasing good governance, and constructively dealing with different views and perceptions, which is critical to the process of building a peaceful society.^v

Sustaining Peace

'Sustaining peace' is a concept that emerged from the discussions about the 2030 Agenda

and has been used since the adoption of the SDGs.^{vi} The key message of the *Sustaining Peace Agenda* is that peacebuilding must focus on prevention and local, bottom-up, inclusive, and participatory peacebuilding. Other important aspects put forward are focusing on trust-building and collaboration between citizens, as well as between citizens and the state, supporting the establishment of norms, rules and processes for social equity and justice, actively including and engaging women, young people and other traditionally discriminated and/or left behind groups in processes which support peacebuilding and working on eradicating all forms of violence, as well as supporting people's mental health as a precondition allowing for more peaceful societies.^{vii}

HOW DO THE ARTS AND CULTURE CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINING PEACE?

Research and practice over the last two decades have shown that art and culture effectively contribute to various aspects of the Sustaining Peace Agenda. In this reflection paper, we propose three categories to summarise these contributions: resilience, spaces, and shifts.

Resilience

First, art and culture contribute to building and supporting **will, stamina and courage** among conflict-affected individuals. Creating and enjoying art has been shown to enhance people's capacity to endure and adapt to the challenges of living in conflict zones. This type of resilience builds a **foundation for peace**. The more resilient people living in conflict contexts are, the more likely it is that they are capable and willing to engage with others constructively.

Artistic activities are a means of **self-expression** with an empowering effect, both for individuals and groups, as demonstrated by a cultural project in Nicaragua for children and youth, which reportedly increased young people's **self-esteem** and capacity to deal with conflict. Cultural institutions play an important role in

building people's resilience in conflict contexts. They create opportunities and provide spaces for people to explore their creativity, emotions, and self-confidence. On the collective level, exploring and valuing identity, heritage, and history, as well as expressing related feelings, helps communities create **unity and solidarity** and reinforces their ability to jointly face challenges. Even the work of a single local community artist can be a source of encouragement for others in times of distress, as a project with forcefully displaced farmers in Colombia who sing about the injustice they face has shown. **Cultural heritage** is integral to people's identity. Therefore, it is key to safeguard it in situations of crisis or conflict. It is also the reason why authoritarian regimes often forbid cultural practices and traditions of groups perceived as a threat. People's **sense of belonging** can be an important form of peaceful resistance and hence a key factor in sustaining peace.

Art can also provide a **sense of 'normality during 'abnormal' times**: a beautiful piece of art can have a soothing effect on our nervous system, while a theatre play or a movie can transport us to another world, momentarily distracting us from life's adversities. In Myanmar, an SDC-funded project provided emergency grants to artists to help them continue their work despite the ongoing crises. Some of the artists created art under the most unimaginable circumstances. For instance, one artist, during his displacement, set up an arts exhibition in the forest for the people who were on the move with him.

Distraction is one strategy for maintaining mental health; another one is **processing** difficult emotions: creative engagement has a soothing effect on our brain, activating the parasympathetic system and calming the amygdala, our brain's alarm centre, through the release of oxytocin, endorphins and dopamine, hormones which heighten spirits and calm the nervous system.^{viii} Both distraction and processing have been proven to **prevent and recover from emotional distress and trauma** caused by crisis or conflict. At the same time, negative emotions, particularly anger in the face of injustice, need an **outlet** so as not to translate into aggression against others or oneself. Depression and the inability to stand up against injus-

tice can lead to despair and suicide. Having an outlet for negative emotions through creative expression is key to **violence prevention**, as it can save lives.

Another aspect related to self-empowerment is **self-initiative**, an antidote to helplessness, as well as to the paralysis people experience, particularly in contexts of protracted crisis or conflict. Where people don't see a way out of the situation and no road towards normalcy, creating art can offer them new perspectives.

People can discover new ways of seeing themselves and their challenges. In many contexts, art has proven a powerful tool for **non-violent resistance**, especially when creativity is practiced collectively. In others, creative expression has helped people to build new competencies and even to find **new, creative ways to make a living**, not only in the creative industries but also as creative social workers, art therapists, or entrepreneurs in other domains, inspired by their creative engagement. The possibility to generate resources for one's own and one's family's survival prevents violence, as in economic crises prevalent in conflict contexts, often the only way to earn a living is to fight. Secured livelihoods represent an important pillar for peace.

Spaces

Second, art and culture provide, strengthen, or maintain **spaces** for cultural diversity, expression and dialogue and thereby contribute **to creating the conditions for peace**, which can result in increased trust, dialogue, and safety to express oneself in a diverse civic space. Cultural institutions play a crucial role as providers of spaces, as demonstrated by SDC project experiences, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. These spaces offer a platform for societal groups that are often marginalised or excluded – such as women, youth, indigenous communities, and displaced or economically disadvantaged individuals – to express themselves safely and without fear of oppression or threats from other groups. Through creative expression, these spaces allow for **self-representation and self-determination**, fostering **recognition** and enabling more equitable engagement among societal groups, challenging or at least questioning existing

power asymmetries.

Art has often been prominent in resistance movements, as **it can provoke and express messages** that move and potentially mobilise the population to unite in opposition to a dysfunctional system and call for social reforms. It is crucial to highlight the role of cultural spaces in empowering local actors from the ground up, fostering resilience and confidence. This is especially relevant in discussions about decolonising and localising development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding efforts. Through the imagery of art – present not only in visual art but also in music, film or performing arts – people can also **express opinions or challenge taboos**, such as advocating for democracy in an authoritarian context, in more **subtle, sometimes in ambiguous ways**, thereby stimulating conversation and dialogue. For example, a theatre group in Sri Lanka achieved this by touring across conflict zones during the war, using their performances to foster peace among the warring parties. The potential of art in this respect is that it can be perceived as **entertainment** and, therefore, less politically charged. Understanding the risks associated with both subtle and overt artistic messaging is crucial, especially in volatile crisis and conflict situations, where artists actively engaged in social issues may inadvertently expose themselves to danger. In Myanmar, cultural projects had to be adapted to the political changes, for example through replacing more outspoken advocacy endeavours with documenting human rights abuses against artists or transferring training courses and exhibitions to the digital space. Engaging in regular joint conflict sensitivity analysis and action planning with all involved is key under such circumstances. This also ensures self-determined risk management and doing no harm, instead of a project-imposed approach.

The unique potential of art to speak for itself is also essential, as it has the capacity to open doors for **dialogue**. Art **sparks reflection** and offers the opportunity to **juxtapose creative expression** from different sources in contexts where speaking with the other side is perceived as too sensitive or too painful – bypassing the need to talk to the other side, or even for their presence. Such subtle engagements **avoid harm**. Hence, a carefully designed and facilitated arts and culture initiative can be an entry

point for dialogue, implying that co-existence is possible even in contexts where overcoming differences, particularly through reconciliation, is not yet thinkable. The lived experience of different sides' representatives being able to **safely present confronting views and narratives** through art is a first step towards **unity in diversity**. If direct exchange with others is possible, and cultural practitioners actively engage people from different sides in joint projects or invite people from different sides to enjoy art, it is key to ensure that the exchanges are not competitive and debate oriented but based on mutual respect irrespective of existing differences. The sense of safety this conveys makes room for creating **mutual understanding**, as the atmosphere invites people to genuinely hear each other out, listen to each other's stories, step into each other's shoes and look at everything from **multiple perspectives**. People's personal stories, which naturally express their feelings and needs, shift the focus of both speakers and listeners from differing positions towards more universal human experiences and feelings. This almost certainly leads to **minimised prejudice** and increased empathy. This is how people start to imagine a **pluralistic society** as a real possibility and peaceful co-existence as an achievable goal towards which every individual can contribute.

Shifts

Third, art and culture contribute to **shifts** in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour, which are **motors for change**. Lederach calls the magic moments in peacebuilding, when people shift perceptions, as "moments of serendipity" because such shifts cannot be predicted, only be hoped for – and it is hard to know beforehand what exactly will provoke such shifts in people's minds and hearts.

Art and culture's unique capacity to provoke such shifts has been observed in many contexts. Art's power to transform attitudes by **touching people's hearts** happens at the individual level. This process can lead to shifts in public perception, impacting decisions and actions across various levels of government and civil society. Ultimately, art facilitates peaceful societal change by fostering a shared understanding and altering the collective consciousness.^{ix}

Shifting emotions moves mountains, even in contexts of high-level diplomacy, as it happened in the peace process in Ossetia, led by a Swiss ambassador who successfully used his own paintings to support the mediation or when IDPs in Colombia were recognised again as victims by the state after a live concert where decision-makers shared how they got goosebumps and started crying while listening to their powerful songs about what they went through. Hence, art can also evidence human rights abuses or act as testimonials in processes of truth-seeking and transitional justice.

On the level of local communities, where artistic and cultural engagement for peacebuilding primarily happens, art's contribution to **social cohesion** is widely recognised. This particularly relates to exploring historical memory, (re-)building trust in other people and in governmental and non-governmental institutions. It is also associated with healing trauma, individually and collectively, increasing acceptance, mutual empathy for the co-suffering of conflict parties, or finding ways to collaborate on joint solutions, like improving people's living conditions.

For cultural interventions focusing on **dealing with the past**, it is critical to ensure non-judgmental, impartial representation and recognition of people's individual and collective memory and ensure that truth is explored from different perspectives. **Supporting people's mental health** does not only strengthen people's resilience, it is often a pre-condition for transformative shifts, as **coping with difficult experiences and overcoming trauma** allow for engaging safely with "the other side(s)". Moreover, the collective processing of emotions does not only need to focus on negative emotions or heal emotional wounds caused by conflict. It can also **focus on positive emotions**, strengthening people's resilience and sense of **unity in diversity**. It can therefore help people to be more **forward-looking, focusing on solutions** instead of being stuck in the past or having a problematic present.

Hindering factors for shifts to happen still abound: in protracted crisis or conflict contexts, where historical narratives define **power dynamics and elites** fear the loss of their influence or their benefit from the status quo, 'powerful people' often have no interest in

peaceful change. In contexts where expressing one's opinion exposes oneself to **threats to one's integrity or life**, it becomes challenging to harness the art and culture's transformative power. In such cases, focusing on culture's power to reinforce people becomes a transformative act and an essential contribution to people's resilience and mental health, which is key to preventing further violence. This is currently being successfully done in the framework of a project in Myanmar that focuses on supporting artists and the arts ecosystem as a means of non-violent resistance against injustice.

Where the **context does allow for an active civil society**, involving artists in **advocacy** can be very powerful, as artists are influential communicators and can reach broad audiences through creative and inspiring expression, which reaches the public through large-scale actions or campaigns in the public space, through traditional and social media. This way, art does not only have a unique potential to raise awareness and reach broad audiences, even internationally, but it also motivates people to unite and engage in movements for justice and peace. This sense of agency applies in particular to young people: if they become aware that instead of channeling their frustration into violent action, they can use their high energy constructively, they become peaceful change agents. Some use their familiarity with digital technologies in artistic expression to inspire others to reflect critically on their attitudes and behaviour, engage in non-violent resistance or contribute to creating historical memory through virtual exhibitions, festivals or archives. Some motivate others to engage in social action and advocate for the establishment of new norms, rules and processes for increased social equity and justice. Others address the climate crisis, aiming to prevent conflict escalation and increase people's security.^x

CULTURE'S CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTING AND MITIGATING CONFLICT IN DIFFERENT STAGES OF CONFLICT

As the Sustaining Peace Agenda strongly recommends focusing more on preventing conflict, reflecting on conflict stages regarding arts and culture's potential to bring about positive change is important. First and foremost, it seems odd to speak about conflict prevention only before conflicts break out: prevention is necessary in all stages of conflict, as in any phase, more intense conflict can be prevented. The same applies to conflict mitigation: it can happen at any stage. We often see that post-conflict interventions, including all dimensions of dealing with the past, are mitigating and preventive, as their purpose is not only to (re-)establish social justice and trust as well as restore human relations but also to set the parameters for sustainable, peaceful living together, which is avoiding the relapse into conflict. In contexts of protracted conflict, like Israel/Palestine or Congo, peacebuilding efforts often focus on preventing further violence, for example, through creating better living conditions for the population or investing in peace education, while at the same time working on peace mitigation by supporting efforts to increase social justice, good governance and supporting comprehensive, inclusive peace processes.

The contribution of arts and culture to prevention and mitigation in all phases and areas of conflict highly depends on the context and is not more or less meaningful in a particular phase of crisis or conflict. However, during a crisis or conflict, cultural projects must be designed considering the escalation levels, carefully assessing what is possible, and considering the circumstances.

INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN INCREASED RESILIENCE, PLURALISTIC SPACES, AND TRANSFORMATIVE SHIFTS

The three categories' resilience', 'spaces and 'shifts' show the many ways arts and culture contribute to sustaining peace. For example, the healing power of arts can strengthen people's capacity to resist non-violently, and it can help them to come to terms with the past, a precondition to engage in constructive dialogue with people from the 'other side' and accept coexisting with them or even (re-)building relations after the conflict.

Some actions can mutually reinforce each, such as trust-building, creating a safe space for self-expression, and fostering dialogue. At times, they can also build upon one another, with one acting as a prerequisite for the next. For instance, self-worth is a precondition to engaging confidently in dialogue, setting shared objectives, and participating in advocacy with decision-making bodies. Ideally, this leads to actions like establishing processes to address social justice issues, such as adopting more inclusive and equitable legislation.

It is also worth reflecting on how arts and culture for development, in humanitarian aid and for peace reinforce each other. We know that working towards sustainable development is an important contribution to peace. For example, good governance is indispensable for sustaining peace because many crises and conflicts happen in systems characterised by social injustice, which do not allow all citizens to have a say in shaping their society. Gender equality is a precondition for inclusive governance and a more equitable society. In political landscapes across the world, women are still heavily underrepresented. Men are also the main political decision-makers in crisis and conflict contexts. The protection of women's rights and interests through women's political representation is therefore still a number one priority for peacebuilders and has rightly been declared a peacebuilding priority by the UN. Governance, as well



The flowers represent the different & interconnected ways arts & culture can contribute to preventing and reducing violence and fostering peace. The flowers cross-fertilize and thereby can also increase peaceful change. ©HELVETAS

as gender and social equity, are as much development priorities as people's economic wellbeing, which in turn is an important factor for crisis mitigation and conflict prevention. Cultural engagement for development and in humanitarian aid, therefore, in many ways, is also conducive to peace. To increase culture's impact on peace, however, theories of change must underline culture's unique contribution to peace, integrate it with other approaches and working fields and clearly show how they reinforce each other. Arts and culture are essential aspects of every society, as they shape people's perceptions, identities and narratives – all crucial aspects which hinder or enable working towards peace in any society.

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON DIFFERENT SOCIETAL LEVELS

Peacebuilding with impact must happen on multiple levels and be linked and aligned to be effective. This is not only in Lederach's pyramid theory, but also in the Reflecting on Peace Practice approach developed by the Collaborative for Development Action, which is based on empirical research and evidence. According to Lederach, track I focuses on top-range high-level political, governmental, ethnic, and religious leaders. Middle-range respected leaders from all domains, including academic, CSO and NGO

leaders are located on track II. Track III is referred to as the grassroots track, where local government and community leaders are active. For peacebuilding to be effective, the work on all tracks does not only need to be coordinated and linked; it also needs to involve influential people and a minimum percentage of people representing all segments of a society to ensure more equal, and inclusive participation in peacebuilding.

Cultural **engagement** for peace tends to happen mostly on track III, while some also happens on track II and rarely on track I. The potential for arts and culture 's impact in high-level peace mediation processes is being explored through some initiatives but remains inconclusive so far. In terms of the **influence** cultural engagement has on leaders of different tracks, most cultural practitioners and researchers believe that art and culture can influence leaders on all three levels, whereas development practitioners see the main influence domains typically on tracks II and III. Art and culture provide a huge potential to bridge not only horizontal divides between different societal groups but also vertical ones: one of the Colombian farmers mentioned above sang a government-critical song directly to the President at a political dialogue event and received his applause. The singer's critical expression was direct but disguised in such beauty that it was received without resistance or anger by the criticized and created a momentum for positive change.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO ARTS AND CULTURE FOR SUSTAINING PEACE

After this bouquet of opportunities for arts and culture's contribution to building and sustaining peace, it is time to turn to inherent risks and challenges. Some have been alluded to already but need more explanation, while others are mentioned now. The main risks and challenges are related to:

1. The contexts in which the initiatives are implemented,
2. The way they are implemented and/or
3. Their impact.

Context-related risks and challenges

The continuous **rise of authoritarianism**, linked to **a high unpredictability of drastic contextual changes** in volatile environments, is one of the biggest challenges for safe, meaningful and sustainable cultural engagement for sustaining peace. As we have witnessed in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine and some West African countries over the last years, military coups and other unlawful seizures of power lead to censorship of cultural actors, the prohibition and destruction of critical art, limited freedom of movement, persecution and prosecution of cultural actors, leading to displacement, imprisonment, torture, killings and threats against whole families. This not only jeopardises artists' lives and limits the freedom of expression of artists living in authoritarian regimes but also artist refugees living in exile.

Cultural project implementors are often forced to question the continuation of activities under such circumstances to ensure the safety and security of all people involved and sometimes to mitigate over-exposure and targeting.

In such situations, conflict sensitivity becomes essential: risks must be regularly assessed jointly with all implementing parties, thresholds for stopping the interventions, feasible workarounds must be defined and agreed on, and protection measures for staff and partners must be set up carefully. On the programming side, emergency support projects for artists should be considered so that they can continue their work and safeguard spaces for cultural and civic engagement and expression with communities. Travel restrictions make increasing conflict-affected remote communities' access to culture even more difficult. Organisations should try as long as possible to secure this access or find alternative ways to connect affected groups or populations to the outside world, for example, through virtual

events. Despite the challenges, it is vital to maintain such artistic spaces for resilience, both for artists to support each other and for local communities to better endure the hardships caused by crisis and/or conflict.

Implementation-related risks and challenges

Some challenges related to implementation are:

1. That people who implement the projects have difficulties understanding each other's worlds, particularly if artists and development or humanitarian professionals collaborate directly or
2. That projects are implemented by people who lack cultural, gender and conflict sensitivity, and
3. That those who propose or support artistic projects do not have enough understanding about culture's potential and therefore make non-strategic choices.

Consequently, culture projects can sometimes be socially insignificant or even counter-productive, leading to the perception that cultural support is irrelevant to development and peace.

Cultural, development and humanitarian practitioners need to get to know each other better to avoid misunderstandings: in all three domains, people do important work for sustaining peace, but they hardly join forces and are therefore often not sufficiently familiar with the other sectors' work, and more particularly, each other's realities, principles, values, approaches and habits. Practitioners who engage with the 'other side' should avoid getting lost in translation and consequently get frustrated. Flexibility, the ability to live with compromise, pragmatism, and adaptive management capacity helps create successful cross-sectoral collaboration. **Two main impact-related challenges are:**

1. Art's potential to fuel conflict and
2. The difficulty of predicting and measuring the impact of arts and culture on sustaining peace.

These are the two most widely discussed challenges of art and culture for peacebuilding.

Art has the **potential to fuel conflict** by contributing to polarisation through persuasive, divisive art, which blames others for their pain, glorifying violence or spreading discriminatory narratives, hate speech or rumours, all of which can be self-initiated or commissioned by conflict parties. Art can also do harm by revictimising people who are or were directly or indirectly affected by crisis or violence. These risks can be mitigated through carefully assessing artworks with a team of local artists with different backgrounds and analysing sources of tension and drivers of conflict.

Other drivers for fuelling conflicts are non-sensitive language and disrespectful actions in cultural initiatives. The lack of sensitivity is often unintentional and can be assigned, for instance, to a lack of contextual understanding, a lack of understanding of others' interests and needs, a lack of impartial behaviour or a lack of capacity to communicate inclusively or non-violently.

Such challenges can be anticipated and prevented in the planning phase of a project, factoring in some time in the inception phase for creating a common understanding about the goals of the project, engaging in a joint conflict sensitivity assessment and agreeing on how to communicate and behave with concerned primary, secondary and boundary stakeholders of the project. In some cases, special strategies make sense, for example, involving peacebuilders who are victims of conflict as facilitators and role models, as it is a common practice in Colombia. Another strategy can be to involve 'outsider insiders' like representatives of INGOs or international artists, who have a reputation as credible cultural peacebuilders familiar with the local context. Strengthening peoples' capacity to be and act culture, gender and conflict-sensitively, with a focus on non-violent communication, is another meaningful measure.

One of the biggest challenges for arts and culture projects building peace remains the **limited possibility of predicting and measuring their impact**. This topic has not only been discussed for decades; it has sometimes also become the elephant in the room. It is not only a

challenge for arts and culture in the domain of peacebuilding but for peacebuilding itself.

Whereas development efforts can often predict planned outputs and outcomes, this is much harder for peacebuilding due to the unpredictability of contextual changes or human reactions. The same applies to arts and culture interventions. While an initiative can be much less significant than expected, another initiative can go viral and exceed everyone's expectations in terms of reach and impact. Arts and culture initiatives are usually process-oriented and can develop in different directions, depending on the traction and response of the activities or due to ideas that only evolve through engagement in the process - even though they have clear goals.

To address these challenges, evidence-based plans with clear objectives but no clear targets, developed by experienced, conflict-sensitive professionals, will be sufficient for a donor to trust the process and engage. Unpredictable outcomes of artistic and cultural peacebuilding processes have often been more effective than predictable ones could have been expected to achieve. With these preconditions in place, it is recommended to be flexible and bold in investing in such processes, as they create the possibility of many unintended positive impacts, as several cases have shown.

Working with the 'right people' is also key to achieving meaningful impact. This means having the right balance of actors, which often implies interdisciplinary teams with different genders and backgrounds. In this respect, it is important to consider how projects come about, who initiates them, who collaborates and why. In general, the more locally rooted and initiated a process is, the better, as long as the initiators are culturally, gender and conflict sensitive and don't put themselves in impartial or other risky positions or situations. For projects involving active community participation, inclusion is also key.

Finally, it is important to stress one general recommendation: for arts and culture initiatives for peacebuilding to have a substantial impact, cultural processes must be carefully curated and facilitated. This requires a cultural mediator to ensure the right direction, quality and depth of

arts and culture processes by guaranteeing cultural, gender and conflict sensitivity, engaging participants in reflection and experiential learning, and mitigating the risks to which the actors involved might be exposed.

As regards measuring impact, experience has shown that the process of the cultural initiative can be an equally or even more valuable outcome than the intended products. Documenting the process is key, not only for measuring impact, but also for witnessing and sharing when change happens, sometimes unexpectedly. Moreover, measuring progress and impact is not impossible. Practice has shown that approaches such as 'most significant change' and outcome mapping are useful ways of measuring the impact of arts and culture projects.

ENHANCING THE POWER OF THE ARTS FOR SUSTAINING PEACE

Reflecting on the key aspects that the Sustaining Peace Agenda prioritises for successful peacebuilding in the context of our current world order, it is clear that harnessing the power of culture to promote sustainable peace is more of an imperative than a suggestion. Yet despite the well-known contributions of culture to peacebuilding, the recognition that cultural work is critical to sustaining peace is still mostly confined to reports and resolutions rather than being embedded in mindsets and the strategies, budgets of organisations. Raising awareness of this largely untapped potential in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding landscape is, therefore, both timely and necessary.

The SDC recognises the importance of culture's contribution to these areas. Yet, many culture focal points at SDC cooperation offices state that they do not – or not primarily – support cultural engagement contributing to sustaining peace. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Is it because sustaining peace is not a main priority, or is the potential of arts and culture for preventing and reducing crisis or conflict underestimated or overlooked?

Perhaps SDC representatives do not feel they have the legitimacy to engage in such activities. What would be needed to encourage SDC and development, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors to harness the power of culture?

Acknowledging the role of culture in all aspects of sustaining peace is crucial, as well as increasing awareness of how the cultural sector can be meaningfully supported for this purpose. This involves investing more in communicating best practices and success stories, and constructively countering the still prevalent narrative that views support for culture as a 'luxury'. For instance, François Matarasso has beautifully described the importance of arts and culture for people in crisis, reflecting on the role of culture in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The same applies to the role of art in the context of humanitarian crises and conflicts. Therefore, mainstreaming arts and culture in work on the triple nexus to support people in crises, with a particular focus on self-empowerment and healing for vulnerable groups and survivors of physical and psychological violence through engagement with the arts, should become the new normal. It is essential to disseminate this information more widely to increase knowledge of the importance of this under-appreciated and under-funded workstream, especially among decision-makers who shape funding programmes and trends.

At the **international level**, discussions on declaring culture a public good and including a cultural goal in the next edition of the development goals gained new momentum at the UNESCO Mondiacult conference in Mexico in 2022 and are a hot topic in current reflections on culture and development.^{x1} The SDC could step up its involvement in this global debate and support advocacy efforts that aim to ensure that culture is given a prominent place in the next sustainable development framework, thus paving the way for greater recognition of and investment in the sector.

In **Switzerland**, increased interdivisional and -departmental collaboration between the SDC and other relevant divisions in relevant Federal departments^{xii} could leverage the recognition of arts and culture's potential for development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding to increase impact through jointly financed and implement-

ed strategic projects. The next dispatch to Parliament on international cooperation should prominently reflect the role of culture in these areas to earmark the necessary financial resources. Public political debates should feature discussions on culture's contribution to development, humanitarian aid, and peace, with the aim of garnering support from policymakers and forging alliances with concerned organisations. The SDC could potentially lead by establishing a platform for interdepartmental exchange on the role of art and culture in peacebuilding. At the **SDC head office**, the upcoming update of the Thematic Guidance for Culture and Development presents an opportunity for critical reflection on whether the allocated one per cent of the overall budget for culture is adequate and aligns with policy objectives, and whether an increase to five per cent would allow for a more comprehensive, strategic cultural engagement for development, humanitarian aid and peace. Involving culture focal points in these reflections would be key to developing a shared vision of what meaningful and strategic cultural engagement means for the SDC, as according to the SDC's overview, there is considerable variation in how country offices allocate budgets and engage in culture.^{xiii}

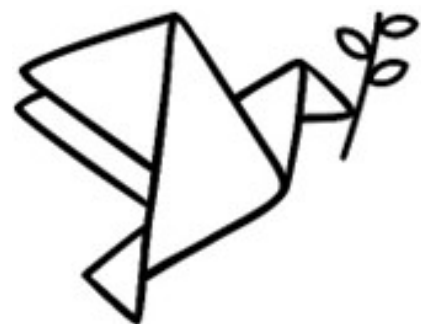
All **SDC country programmes** should consider strategic arts and culture programmes. For example, a modular, user-friendly and flexibly applicable compendium or toolbox could be useful for concrete practitioner guidance. Another option is to offer expert support and coaching tailored for practitioners in development and humanitarian aid. Specialists with experience in the culture sector could provide this support, helping to navigate the complexities of the field. Their expertise would be instrumental in fostering successful collaborations among various actors. The SDC's community of practice, 'Culture Matters', is a valuable platform for learning and exchange. A safe space in the form of an intervention group, where peers can discuss project ideas or challenges they face, could complement these two instruments. Participants should be offered the option to request supervision by an expert whenever needed.

To conclude with a dose of inspiration, this proxy theory of change for arts and culture to sustain peace should serve as an invitation for the read-

er to become more involved in meaningful arts and culture projects and initiatives for sustaining peace. While an intervention may not address every aspect, it should thoughtfully assess each element as a crucial part of the overall strategy. This approach is effective when grounded in a comprehensive analysis that considers conflict, gender, and power dynamics, and aligns with wider peacebuilding initiatives:

Strong minds, healthy bodies, compassionate hearts and deep roots create fertile ground and a solid foundation for peace to take root or develop. Safe spaces that encourage free expression, exchange and dialogue build on this foundation and cultivate the conditions necessary for peaceful transformation. When individuals can express themselves freely and creatively within a thriving and diverse civil society, they become powerful agents in preventing and mitigating violent conflict, fostering unity and building harmonious communities.

As they envision a world where all people can live in dignity and tranquillity, they unite to advocate for social change. This collective effort contributes not only to institutional and legal change, but also to improved relationships among people who, despite differing perspectives and opinions, embrace acceptance and reject the urge to dominate others.



ENDNOTES

- i Tolstoy, Leo (1902). "The Kingdom of God is Within You; What is Art?", in: The Novels and Other Works of Leo N. Tolstoy. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- ii Lederach, John Paul (2005). The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding. Oxford, MA: Oxford University Press.
- iii JR (2015). Can art change the world? London: Phaidon.
- iv SDC's cultural engagement is rooted in the Federal Act on International Cooperation from 1976. The 2005 UNESCO convention on the protection and promotion of cultural expression, of which Switzerland is a signatory, marks another momentum, which increased the importance of SDC's mandate to support arts & culture for development.
- v This definition is based on and adapted from UNDP's and Search for Common Ground's definitions of social cohesion.
- vi The UN issued two resolutions, sometimes referred to as the "twin resolutions" on sustaining peace: the UN General Assembly's Resolution 262 and the UN Security Council's Resolution 2282, both adopted in 2016. UN Secretary-General António Guterres outlines in his report Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace (A/76/668-S/2022/66) the main aspects of sustaining peace, whereas he proposes a "new agenda for peace" in his "Our Common Agenda" policy brief no. 9, as an input to the discussion about the post-2030 goals for sustainable development and peace.
- vii On the more technical side, the agenda proposes to focus on the digital aspects of peacebuilding, including artificial intelligence, addressing the linkages between climate change, peace and security, and coordinated, multilateral prevention of the proliferation of atomic and biological weapons, including prohibiting lethal autonomous weapon systems in outer space.
- viii According to M.L. Clark, who in her thesis "The creative path to peace: an exploration of creative arts-based peacebuilding projects, from 2019, refers to the work of L. Marshall, Art of Peacebuilding, 2014.
- ix To learn more about involving key people and more people for peaceful change, see: Microsoft Word - RPP Basics Resource Manual 01.11.17_AE.docx (cdacollaborative.org)
- x The SDC's overview of its support for artistic and cultural expression in 2022 suggests that the organisation's cultural commitment contributes to peaceful coexistence and social cohesion through "building bridges between people and communities, fostering tolerance, reconciliation and breaking down stereotypes". Most of the impact of its support to culture therefore contributes to conflict transformation, even if it is not necessarily labelled as such.
- xi For more information, read the British Council's report "The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place Within and Beyond the Sustainable Development Goals".
- xii For this interdepartmental collaboration, the SDC should encourage first and foremost the Peace and Human Rights Division, also located in the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Office of Culture. However, other departments could be relevant as well, for example, the newly created State Secretariat of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, which will be responsible for a holistic approach to security, dealing with civilian and international aspects of security.
- xiii The overview of the SDC's support to artistic and cultural expression in the South and the East in 2022 distinguishes between multi-year national or regional arts and culture programs, one-off activities referred to as small actions and projects which do not target the cultural sector but contain minor cultural activities.



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