

Art as Peace Building

**Annex 1
Case Studies Myanmar**

Disclaimer

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Country Context and Case Studies

Myanmar

Country Context and Framing of the Conflict

Myanmar has been afflicted by prolonged internal conflicts and militarisation since gaining independence in 1948. The political environment deteriorated under the 1962 military coup, and subsequent military regimes fostered a system where power holders failed to create a unified nation-state that sufficiently reflected the diverse aspirations for autonomy and self-governance among ethnic groups. In Myanmar, it is important to emphasise the tension and power relations between majority Burmese and other dominant groups, and essentially understanding how they have been treating marginalised groups (e.g. Rohingya). This kind of tension needs to be explored to provide this rather complex context within which the case study projects were delivered.

The latest crisis began with the military coup on February 1, 2021, plunging the country into an escalating civil war, which is now stretching into its fifth year. The operating environment is characterised by conflict between multiple armed actors across multiple, simultaneous fronts with fragmenting and emerging alliances. Key actors include the military regime, the National

Unity Government (NUG), various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), and newly formed resistance groups like the People's Defence Forces (PDFs). The military has historically employed divide-and-rule tactics and has attempted to assert control through force, assimilation, and expansion of Bamar state authority. The country is struggling with state failure, marked by economic downturns, collapsed health and education systems, and deteriorating humanitarian conditions (International Crisis Group, 2025; The Asia Foundation, 2024)

The contemporary resistance movement in Myanmar is defined by a "triangle model of resistance," a tripartite framework where armed struggle, non-violent campaigns and activities, and diasporic transnational advocacy collaborate and mutually reinforce one another (Htet Lynn Oo, 2024). The non-violent campaigns involve widespread peaceful protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM); economic/political non-cooperation to undermine the military regime's administrative capabilities. The longevity and effectiveness of these non-violent actions rely heavily on the support from

the other two elements: armed resistance groups in contested areas, while diaspora communities offer crucial material, financial, and psychological support. The transnational diaspora acts as a vital corner of this triangle, focusing efforts on advocacy and fundraising. Diaspora communities leverage technological advancements and transnational networks to communicate, mobilise financial resources, and exert pressure on international stakeholders and host governments to recognise

resistance leadership like the National Unity Government (NUG). Fundraising efforts are massive, with networks raising millions of dollars through various strategies, including arts and culture activities; for example, a director named Ko Pauk created a movie, *Ma Thawk Mi Thaw Moe Khar Yay*, and screened it worldwide to raise thousands of dollars for the revolution, demonstrating how creative expression fuels the resistance financially (Htet Lynn Oo, 2024).

Cultural Ecosystem, Stakeholders and Infrastructure

Within this fractured environment, the cultural sector operates as a hybrid ecosystem of local civil society organisations, artist collectives, and independent cultural workers, sustained by partnerships with international actors, and regional diaspora networks.

Art became a critical vehicle for resistance in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, leading to the proliferation of transnational solidarity art, a form of activism wherein creative works are transmitted digitally overseas and sold to provide crucial financial and moral support. This practice, also termed migrating art, expands activism by crossing borders, reaching broader audiences, and facilitating the flow of resources directed toward resistance efforts (Banki, 2023, 2024).

Arts and cultural production persist despite censorship, security risks, internet shutdowns, banking restrictions, and limited mobility. Hybrid approaches - blending online and offline methods - have become necessary. Digital platforms serve as both exhibition spaces and safe channels for communication, while discreet community workshops continue to take place in displacement camps and ethnic-controlled areas. These practices operate within a fragile balance between creative autonomy and safety, underpinned by safeguarding norms and pragmatic ethics that prioritise protection alongside expression.

Peacebuilding and Fragility Discourse

Although many artists may lack a formal, theoretical understanding of peacebuilding concepts, human rights, or civic education, their practical efforts align with promoting relational peace by cultivating empathy and mutual respect among diverse groups. Artists understand that art can motivate these essential values (Mai Aye Aye Aung et al. n.d.). The Peace Through Culture project (2020-2023) demonstrated that, with adequate skills development and financial resources, artists and community members can be effectively engaged in sustained peacebuilding initiatives.

However, the capacity for strategic peace intervention is severely limited by a lack of artistic freedom due to political

unrest and the personal security risks involved in public collaboration or critical expression. Artists emphasise the need for a supportive situation that allows them the freedom to think, create, and perform arts openly for peace to effectively flourish (Mai Aye Aye Aung et al. n.d.).

Many initiatives operate with an experiential peace pedagogy, emphasising pluralistic values, coexistence, and inclusion across communities (Peace Through Culture). In the current “double crisis” of repression and instability, CSOs’ priorities are driven by themselves, with a void of collaboration with policy-level stakeholders.

Dominant Approaches and Mechanisms

The Myanmar case studies reveal that arts-based peacebuilding initiatives have evolved significantly in response to the country’s shifting political landscape, particularly following the 2021 coup. These projects demonstrate several interconnected approaches to using creative practice as a mechanism for social cohesion, resistance, and community resilience.

- **Identity, Voice, and Storytelling** emerge as the most prevalent dimensions across initiatives. Projects prioritise narrative-making as a tool for both preserving cultural identity and processing conflict experiences. These initiatives ensure that marginalised voices—particularly

women, ethnic minorities, and displaced communities—can articulate their own stories rather than having narratives imposed upon them.

- **Skills Development and Economic Resilience** represent a pragmatic strand, for e.g, art social enterprises work with civil servants in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and textile programmes in refugee camps. These projects acknowledge that sustainable peace requires not just dialogue but material security and the capacity to rebuild livelihoods. These projects have a dual function: craft and creative skills serve both as income-generation tools and as

methods for preserving cultural heritage and fostering community cohesion.

- **Digital and Safe Spaces** have become increasingly important. Digital Art Platform (2021-ongoing) treats the digital realm not merely as an alternative venue but as a distinct safe space where critical conversation can occur.
- **Institutional Relationships** Projects in collaboration with government ministries (pre-coup, 2014 - 2019) demonstrates how cultural capacity-

building can create entry points for broader civic development conversations. Pre-coup projects worked within existing governance structures and addressed issues like online hate speech and justice system reform.

- **Diaspora engagement** appears as both a practical necessity and a strategic opportunity. Many projects have built substantial regional networks among diaspora artists, maintaining cultural continuity and advocacy momentum.

Shifts and Cross-Cutting Insights

The 2021 coup serves as a clear inflexion point. Post-coup grassroots arts initiatives increasingly focus on resistance financing, and counter narratives against authoritarianism and advocacy. Institutions focus on trauma healing due to security risks. Arts therapy training projects offer arts-based therapy to ease psychological trauma from conflict.

Safety and Visibility

Projects must undertake significant risk assessments to conceal their involvement in supporting politically outspoken artworks. This is due to a history of foreign institutions being expelled from the country by the military government for amplifying dissenting voices and contributing to further unrest. Robust safeguarding measures are in place to protect the identities of the donor, implementers, artists, and the community. Digital

security concerns are also periodically evaluated to ensure the platform's protection.

Policy vs. Community Needs

In one case study, the participatory workshop leader assessed that when art expressions are forced under a transitional justice framework, they can create unintended conflict. In a country grappling with seven decades of conflict, various communities hold distinct perceptions of justice, each deeply affected by repeated injustices and possessing unique ideas on how to secure their rights. When bringing these diverse communities together, directly articulating the intention of transitional justice can be counterproductive, potentially exacerbating existing discord.

The Role of Art in Peacebuilding Initiatives

Predominantly, art is viewed as an instrument of resilience. Storytelling artworks based on collective memory and art-based therapy for coping have become a popular focus among projects and artists themselves. Artistic expressions moved to semi-underground forms, blending activism with protection. Emphasis (from pre-coup) has shifted from dialogue and compromise towards mutual support and trauma healing.

In projects, international partners assume enabling/convening roles, while local CSOs and diaspora coordinate cultural efforts. Artistic outputs are not about number of events/art pieces but continuity/relationships between artists, audiences and communities. However, challenges such as persistent ethical tensions of using vulnerable stories as artworks, donor requirements vs artists and communities' autonomy, uneven representation of urban vs conflict affected regions still remain.

Practical Recommendations

The following observations and recommendations are made from the case study deep-dives:

The top-down, policy-driven model is proving to be counterproductive, leading to a sense of alienation among the participating artists.

This model primarily positions artists as transient contributors, where their engagement is largely transactional. Their involvement is limited to the immediate financial remuneration and the opportunity to create and exhibit their work within the project's framework. This narrow focus, while providing essential short-term benefits, fails to foster deeper, more meaningful connections between the artists, their creations, and the community the project aims to serve.

The projects need a model that nurtures sustained relationships, fosters a sense of belonging, and ultimately creates a more vibrant and interconnected ecosystem for art and community engagement, leading to lasting peace-building efforts.

In one case study deep-dive, participatory art workshops demonstrate that with sufficient time dedicated to understanding both the community and the art forms they connect with, effective engagement with art for peacebuilding efforts is possible. In another, a hybrid governance model (a consortium of project implementer + local CSOs) proved adaptive to the double crisis of the pandemic and the coup. The resilience of CSOs and artists

maintained continuity of the project, underscoring local ownership. Maintained engagement with local partners and visible collaboration efforts helped credibility of projects among community members, but policy influence still remained curtailed by instability.

Art, as a tool for peace-building, is effective when it resonates with the community it serves.

Participatory art workshops reveal that participants require ample time to develop artistic self-expression. They need opportunities to explore various mediums, learn new techniques, and experiment. Additionally, they must connect with the broader community. Participants often have prior exposure to specific art forms, such as documentaries, ethnic music, or photography. The key is to guide them from their existing knowledge towards exploring metaphorical expressions through art. Ultimately, the community must drive decision-making and feel a strong sense of ownership over the process.

Strategies must be myriad and respond to different communities' needs.

The projects' initial myriad interventions were promising, but security concerns have since rendered some of those interventions unusable. For example, the online engagement model of a project serves urban, upper-middle-class populations accustomed to social media discussions. However, for regions

lacking an internet culture, alternative engagement models are essential. To foster inclusivity and cultural diversity, initiatives must implement tailored strategies for each community.

For maximum effectiveness, artists need to maintain close contact with the community.

In the case of the digital platform model, it lacks a crucial connection: a dialogue between artists and their community. Artists currently create and then vanish, leaving the implementer to interpret public sentiment. This fosters a transactional relationship between artists and the platform, leaving the community unclear about the platform's intentions. However, participatory workshops have demonstrated that establishing relationships between artists and communities leads to more productive exchanges.

Projects need to have long-term strategies.

Introducing artistic expression to communities in Myanmar presents a significant challenge due to their traditional association of art with the expression of traditional values and cultures. For individuals to truly express themselves, a considerable amount of time is needed to grasp and internalise artistic principles. The interviewees have noted, effectively implementing an "arts for peacebuilding" model could span several months to several years.

Future work should pair creative autonomy with reflective practice and a clear “creative ToC.”

In the Peace Through Culture case study, there are signs that a void, or at least a limitation, of creative perspective existed, though not necessarily due to a lack of artistic talent. The constraint was more structural and conceptual. Art was largely framed within a development and peacebuilding logic, where creative expression functioned as an instrument to achieve social cohesion and advocacy outcomes. While this approach enabled measurable results, it left limited space for open-ended exploration, experimentation, or the aesthetic risks that drive creative innovation. Moreover, the project lacked an explicit creative theory of change to explain how art itself could generate new forms of understanding, empathy, or imagination beyond awareness-raising. As a result, artistic outputs often illustrate peace narratives rather than reimagining them, signalling the need

for stronger integration of creative autonomy and reflective art-making processes in future initiatives.

Addressing gender and inclusion gaps through inclusive co-design and participatory arts practices could strengthen future initiatives.

In one case study deep-dive, gender/inclusion under-delivery muted the pluralism ambition of the project. The project’s framing of conflict as a crisis of pluralism and trust shaped an arts-centred, relationship-first logic. The Toolbox from Peace Through Culture project created together with local partners translated this into practice, but contextual shocks (COVID-19 and 2021 Coup), and protocol gaps (Do-No-Harm, gender/inclusion) limited depth and reach.

Case Studies

The name of the case studies and the project implementers have been anonymised for risk aversion of interviewees, and to avoid security concerns for the future implementation of the projects.

The Peace Through Culture Project

Implemented by a consortium of a foreign institution, and local CSOs, the Peace Through Culture project (2020–2023) operated in Kayin, Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, and Mandalay. Delivered amid a “double crisis” of COVID-19 and the 2021 military coup, it focused on pluralism, social cohesion, and dialogue. It framed Myanmar’s conflict not only as political or ethnic, but as a crisis of social cohesion and pluralism, rooted in the erosion of intercultural dialogue and mutual respect.

To operationalise this vision, the project produced the Toolbox from Peace Through Culture project, grounded in experiential peace pedagogy and designed to promote pluralistic values through participatory, arts-based learning. Chapter 2—*Arts and Culture Tools*—contained 17 participatory methods (e.g. food festivals, craft workshops, community exhibitions, photo contests) to foster engagement and intercultural understanding. Importantly, the Toolbox was co-developed not only by the consortium team, but also through technical advice from the Artists Board, composed of locally based cultural organisations and

individual artists. Their contributions were meant to ensure that the tools in Chapter 2 were both contextually relevant and artistically resonant

Theory of Change and Outcomes/Objectives

The underlying theory of change posits that if artists and civil society organisations (CSOs) increase *i.* their awareness of each other, *ii.* their understanding of shared interests in pluralism and social cohesion, *iii.* their collaboration in promoting social cohesion and pluralism, and are resourced to co-implement artistic and cultural initiatives which promote the respect for diversity, pluralism and peaceful co-existence, then, mutual understanding and acceptance increase, collaboration across social divides becomes possible, the social fabric and contract in communities and the society is strengthened and steps towards (re) building and maintaining trust, solidarity and peace together can be taken.

The specific objective of the project is to “*enhance trust and mutual understanding regardless of faith, ethnicity, age or*

gender by empowering local CSOs and their umbrella organisations to use arts, cultural activities and social projects.”

To fulfil this objective, four main goals were set out. Each has its own expected outcomes as:

1. Capacity development – 300 local COs and their umbrella organisations are capacitated to use arts and culture for peace and social cohesion building in their local communities.
2. Sub-grants scheme – Local CSOs are supported financially and coached to facilitate 100 safe and neutral spaces for dialogue or joint action.
3. Developing and sharing evidence – creation of 10 audio-visual documentaries on pluralism are produced and broadcast via different media channels, including social media.
4. Advocacy for a pluralistic society – A network of like-minded ‘pluralistic’ actors is supported in its advocacy work addressing formal and customary laws that discriminate against women, ethnic, religious and other minorities, including women (double discrimination).

Through these goals, the project aims to empower CSOs as key actors for peacebuilding and policy advocacy, specifically by addressing formal and customary laws that hinder the peace process. Therefore, it can be considered an arts-based, community-driven project for policy advocacy. In a global context, similar projects that are delivered by CSOs often seek channels to communicate and collaborate with governments to achieve effective policy advocacy. However, within the ‘double-

crisis’ context in which the elected government was ousted and a power-secured junta was not recognised as government by citizens of Myanmar and global actors, the project’s priorities and agenda are driven by CSOs themselves, with a void of reference to and collaboration with policy-level stakeholders of government.

Findings though the 5 Facets of Success and Failure

5-Facets Snapshot

Purpose: fostering pluralistic, peaceful society via artist-CSO collaboration; built trust, sustained artist motivation, enhanced CSO management and capacity.

Process: hybrid top-down/bottom-up co-design; governance structures -> Consortium of project implementers, local partners and artist board.

Participation: broad community engagement intended across ethnic, religious, gender, age groups; advocacy goal unmet post-2021 due to access barriers; minority voices included but power dynamics unexamined.

Practice: diverse art forms (painting, sculpture, performance, multimedia, digital) adapted for community acceptance and safety; self-censorship limited critical expression; balance between creative vision and safeguarding constrained arts’ role as catalyst for inclusive dialogue on sensitive issues.

Profile: legitimacy built through local partnerships and donor interest; Toolbox adapted beyond original scope; national/regional advocacy potential

curtailed by armed conflict and instability; credibility gaps from insufficient communication protocols and Do-No-Harm/gender-inclusion awareness.

Purpose

The main purpose of the Peace Through Culture project was to foster a pluralistic, inclusive, and peaceful society in Myanmar. The project set the above-mentioned four goals to achieve this aim by supporting CSOs and artists to play a key role in fostering dialogue, non-discrimination, and respect for diversity. Along the project timeline, the ‘double crisis’ of COVID-19 and the 2021 coup created severe challenges for all stakeholders. Nevertheless, the project’s overall aim remained consistent, according to both online data and interview participants.

Positive Outcomes: building trust among diverse community members, providing financial and technical support to artists, and promoting cultural activities. From their own perspectives, participants reported diverse positive outcomes. Artists frequently highlighted the project’s role in maintaining motivation and enabling them to continue creating and exhibiting work despite crisis conditions. Project implementers, meanwhile, noted improved management and networking skills, and the adaptability of the Toolbox content beyond peacebuilding contexts.

Unintended Positive outcomes: local CSOs gained experience with digital tools, developed basic technical skills, and integrated online communication into their work.

Process

The mix of top-down donor support and bottom-up co-design formed a hybrid model that helped the project navigate the ‘double crisis’ by adapting delivery methods and maintaining collaboration between artists and CSOs. Before COVID-19, training and meetings were held almost entirely in person. When restrictions began, the project successfully adapted its training design to online formats. However, this transition also caused setbacks - unstable internet, limited devices, and reduced interactivity - which diluted the created Toolbox’s participatory essence.

Interviewees reported that the Toolbox only partially conveyed the intended concept of pluralism, with some arts tools perceived as externally designed and contextually weak.

After 2021, additional disruptions—bank closures, travel restrictions, and currency controls—further constrained implementation. Yet local implementers and CSOs showed strong adaptability, keeping activities alive despite shortened timelines and reduced artistic scope. The Artist Board, intended to coordinate artist engagement, was largely inactive due to internet shutdowns and mobility limits. One member recalled no meetings, illustrating the difficulty of maintaining formal governance structures.

Nevertheless, grassroots collaboration persisted: artists continued exhibiting through CSO-led events, showing that informal cooperation outlasted institutional paralysis.

Participation

The project aimed to engage with a wide range of communities to leverage “government’s¹ commitment by facilitating safe and creative spaces for inclusive exchange and peaceful dialogue among and between different groups (ethnic, religious, gender, age, people with different roles in society). However, a specific goal advocacy for a pluralistic society by addressing the formal and customary laws that hinder it, was largely not met. This was because the post-2021 context made it almost impossible to engage and communicate with powerholders and government administrative staff members who play a crucial role in legislative amendments to those existing laws. Security risks and mobility restrictions further limited access to target sites, making it difficult to reach vulnerable or discriminated groups in highly conflict-affected areas.

Another example of the project’s art-based initiative attempt was positioning a vulnerable group as storytellers. An award-winning documentary featured a minority family as protagonists, with their daily lives in a small restaurant shop-house narrating the social interactions between two communities divided along racial and religious lines in a conflict-sensitive location. Since the shop-house was situated in a

segregated area designed for minority residence and livelihood, including this family’s voice can be seen as a bold move. However, as the researcher was unable to interview the storytellers directly², this study cannot fully analyze the power dynamics between the participating agency (the CSO and artist), which implemented the art-project and the family in the documentary, and alike, whose voices have long been excluded from other public discourses.

An interview participant, a community member, reflected that she saw very few female artists, particularly representing racial and religious minority groups, involved in the arts projects. She further noted that she did not recognize artworks addressing critical issues such as gender-based violence or highlighting the roles of women’s organisations in social and cultural contexts. A female project implementer also emphasized that the limited³. The number of women and queer representations both in artists and in thematic content restricted opportunities for voices to be heard and for communities to engage with socially relevant narratives through art.

1 In this context, the term government does not refer exclusively to the central authority but also includes regional, local, and de facto power holders. Given Myanmar’s geographically fragmented and politically contested landscape, peacebuilding initiatives and social cohesion activities needed engagement of multiple actors who exercise authority in mixed control areas.

2 As of this research paper’s writing in August 2025, the project area is one of the escalating armed conflict zones, making any travel there impossible.

3 ‘limited’: here should not be mistaken with the limitation due to structural project-level restrictions. Instead, it revealed the fewer number of women artists active in the project sites and the need to actively identify, reach out and empower local emergent young women artists to be included in future art-based projects..

Practice

The artists involved in the Peace Through Culture project included both emerging youth artists who needed to develop skills and veteran artists seeking sustainability and continuity in their profession. From an artistic practice perspective, all these artists used a variety of art forms, including painting, sculpture, performance, multimedia, and digital; however, they adopted their style, methods, and mode of engagement to ensure community acceptance.

For example, the opening scene of the first-prize-winning documentary featured the sound of a morning prayer sermon from the mosque. Due to existing racial and religious tension within the project communities, the documentary was showcased only within the network, and neither to the public nor uploaded on the project website.

In another instance, one veteran artist interviewee revealed that while his original artworks reflected the core project themes, such as the impact of war on children, he doubted that the abstract technique would resonate with the local audience, and the theme would trigger security concerns. In his experience, the community typically relates the arts (here, painting) to cultural traditions. For this reason, along with the peripheral need for safeguarding, he and local CSOs decided to showcase paintings that simply depicted regional landmarks and cultural values, like famous mountains and religious monuments.

These adaptations highlighted some key challenges for both artists and project

implementers involved: (a) balancing their creative vision with the need to safeguard the project, and (b) compensating for the potential abstraction of artistic expression with content that was relevant and accessible to community acceptance and comprehension. Both challenges indicated that such adaptations often hindered the scope for critical reception, limiting opportunities to receive feedback and critiques from peer artists and communities. Moreover, they reduced the potential of the arts to function as an entry point for generating inclusive, constructive, and community-led debates on sensitive social and political issues related to social cohesion, peacebuilding, and intergroup coexistence.

Profile

Since before 2021, the long-standing context of protracted conflicts among ethnic armed organisations, decades of peace process and dialogues, whether under quasi-military rule or the short-lived democratic government, had made it difficult to convince local communities of different backgrounds about the meaning and possibilities of peace. Having lived in conditions lacking peace in their daily lives for generations, many communities had grown sceptical of such efforts. Consequently, some stakeholders may have doubted the seriousness and soft-power legitimacy of the arts-based initiatives of Peace Through Culture and similar projects.

Despite these doubts, the Peace Through Culture project secures its success by establishing a strong connection with local partners. In terms of sustainability, the project attracted

the attention of development donor agencies, and several components of its Toolbox were applied beyond art, culture, and pluralism work. CSOs continued using the project model to present local initiatives in regional forums. Despite these long-term viability, Peace Through Culture's potential for advocating national and regional policy, as well as educational and cultural initiatives across the country, was constrained by the escalating armed conflicts and political instability that have persisted since 2021.

However, a few frictions stemmed from the limited time investment in strengthening communication and negotiation skills and in establishing clear ethical protocols with project participants. Consequently, this could have affected the overall profile and credibility of the Peace Through Culture project to a certain extent. Other gaps, such as the absence of adequate awareness-raising sessions on the 'Do-No-Harm' approach and on gender and inclusion, were later acknowledged by the implementers.

Digital Art Platform

The platform was conceptualised following the 2021 coup in Myanmar. As the role of art in advocating for rights and justice was amplified by artists following the 2021 coup, the platform was conceived to continue utilising art as a catalyst to involve youth and the broader Myanmar public in dialogues concerning justice. The project described itself as a non-political collective, dedicated to fostering dialogue about Myanmar's past, present, and future by amplifying diverse perspectives, voices, and daily experiences. It positions itself as a safe space to voice contemporary human rights and justice issues, without which they believe a future towards democracy and recognition of human rights in Myanmar is not possible. The artworks presented aim to amplify the many voices and identities in Myanmar

Theory of Change and Outcomes/Objectives

The underlying theory of change posits that if the arts and creative practices can enhance understanding among the Myanmar populace of their inherent rights and the principles of transitional justice, then they would be empowered to advocate for their own rights and foster a more secure society. During periods of escalating conflict, when engagement with policy stakeholders for conflict resolution and peacebuilding became unfeasible, increasing access to transitional justice knowledge through the arts was deemed crucial for the public to construct safer societies within their respective contexts—whether urban, rural, or ethnic regions.

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- Raise rights and transitional justice awareness of Burmese society through artworks and dialogue facilitation,
- Give Burmese youth a platform for free expression through artistic works or through conversations,
- Support and amplify young artists and their artworks.

The project is a top-down initiative. The intervention logic relies heavily on the project's main aim of conflict resolution through increasing awareness and knowledge of rights and transitional justice in Myanmar. Artworks and discussions are encouraged to be created within this theme. Storytelling, voice and identity play a central role in this project. Creating digital platforms (website & Facebook page) was a strategy to let artists create and share their works without security concerns and censorship, and youth relate to or comment on the artworks and in turn are encouraged to share their own stories with the project.

In addition to the digital art platform, the project provided grants in conflict areas and IDP camps for participatory art workshops. The workshop leader observes the following outcomes:

Community collaborations to co-create artworks: The workshop fosters trust, bonding, and relationships by enabling participants to connect with the broader community and engage in co-creation.

Art provides indirect metaphorical expressions of conflict and consequent struggles: Art provides a valuable space for diverse voices to be expressed

without causing conflict, particularly in situations where direct communication might lead to disagreement.

Diverse groups of people can come together and listen: Participants from different conflict zones with varying political priorities can listen to each other's stories without judgment or disagreement when these stories are conveyed through artistic expressions.

The long-term impact of these workshops on the communities involved remains unknown. Both the workshop leader and the project team have lost contact with participants, making it impossible to assess the sustained effects of the initiatives and knowledge shared.

Findings though the 5 Facets of Success and Failure

5-Facets Snapshot

Purpose: critical pedagogy and artist-centred dialogue; awareness via accessible media.

Process: hybrid digital–community; iterative via surveys; safety drives format choices.

Participation: breadth online, depth in workshops; equity gaps persist. Practice: freedom within rights/justice themes; archive of plural narratives.

Profile: visible yet constrained; partnerships helpful but governance and safeguarding shape scope.

Purpose

The project is based on critical pedagogy, relying on artist-activists and social movements to instigate critical thinking, examine power structures and

inequality, and advocate for better justice systems. The primary stakeholders in this context are artists. The implementers sought to encourage artists to explore creative endeavours beyond 'art for art's sake' by fostering a dialogical exchange between implementers and artists. This involved establishing a secure environment for artistic expression and cultivating an artist ecosystem where participants could engage in continuous learning and collaboration amongst themselves or with the implementer. The objective is to enable artists to recognise the role of art and creators during transitional periods and to facilitate public engagement with these works. Conceptually, art addressing themes of peace deficits, segregation, or community atrocities is intended to heighten awareness and promote greater peace within the community. While not intentionally designed for peacebuilding, the project implementers posit that certain aspects of their work hold potential for conflict resolution. For example, participatory workshops brought together human rights defenders (activists and journalists) and artists to create art pieces addressing recent aerial bombings. This process, the implementers believe, fostered an authentic environment for mutual learning and the understanding of diverse perspectives. Additionally, artworks exploring counter-propaganda themes promote varied identities and viewpoints. Given the significant role of propaganda television in Burmese society for generations, art that unpacks and examines these long-standing narratives is considered conducive to conflict resolution.

As the project grows older, creative freedom continues, yet the role of

artists as primary stakeholders has been substantially diminished. Artists are now involved as labourers producing artworks intended to initiate online community conversations. According to implementers, the artistic freedom granted for facilitating dialogues has proven less effective in engaging online communities. They observed that works that express the issues subtly through artistic means did not garner significant community engagement, leading to a shift toward mediums that elicit stronger public reactions, such as podcasts or edutainment comics. The approach has evolved into storytelling through what is thought to be more easily digestible mediums. The implementers have indicated that the most crucial stakeholders are now social media management agencies and collaborating organisations involved in podcast creation, rather than the artists.

It is also important to note that most participating artists do not comprehend the concept of utilising art for peacebuilding, justice, or social cohesion as intended by the implementers. Their primary objective appears to be creation. The sole artist who facilitated the participatory arts workshop understood the concept, as they were already familiar with the idea and had previously undertaken projects incorporating it. The remaining artists did not demonstrate this understanding.

Positive outcomes: The implementers believe that artists had the chance to cultivate their artistic maturity, explore diverse mediums, and develop essential skills such as portfolio building and professional presentation. Their networks and visibility expanded through collaborative opportunities with peers and participation in international exhibitions.

Process

The project operates as a hybrid digital–community model. Grants (USD 1,000–1,600 per artist) support the creation of artworks around themes of justice and rights, later uploaded online. Public feedback—via comments, sentiment analysis, and online surveys—feeds into programming and future content design. Participatory arts workshops are also organised in ethnic-controlled or displaced regions under two formats:

Process A: Artists conduct local research, storytelling workshops, and co-create artworks with community participants, culminating in small local exhibitions.

Process B: Workshops take place online, with both facilitators and participants using avatars for anonymity.

In both, creative outputs are shared digitally and occasionally exhibited internationally to raise awareness of Myanmar’s conflict and pluralism efforts.

The process of the project has evolved over time. Phase I (2021–2024) reflected critical pedagogy: artists acted as civic interlocutors, documenting propaganda, trauma, and inequality. Phase II (2025–ongoing) shifted toward edutainment and outreach logic, prioritising podcasts, comics, and “accessible formats” over open-ended artistic exploration. This transition, driven by safety concerns and donor expectations, diluted the initial critical intent and reduced artists’ leadership within the project.

Key tensions: balancing safety with visibility; prioritising scale and engagement over depth; and maintaining artistic autonomy within a top-down, metrics-driven model.

Participation

Participation spans artists, youth audiences, and online communities, yet remains uneven. Most artists are urban-based or from the diaspora, reflecting the digital divide and security constraints in conflict zones. Community involvement occurs mainly online, measured by quantitative metrics rather than relational engagement. The participatory workshops (in IDP camps and ethnic regions) offered more meaningful contact and trust-building, enabling people to express conflict experiences safely. However, follow-up was impossible due to renewed fighting, connectivity loss, and displacement. Artists express gratitude for financial and creative support but note limited ownership, lack of transparency on intellectual property, and little feedback on how their work contributes to justice awareness. Many perceive their role as transactional, producing content rather than co-shaping strategy.

Practice

One of the project’s main objectives is to establish a secure environment for freedom of expression. The approach prioritised using less confrontational imagery to initiate dialogue and focused on reach and social impact rather than purely artistic quality. Artists were not

restricted in their creative output, provided it aligned with themes of rights and justice. Implementers are confident they have provided avenues for growth and networking, and this is largely echoed by artists who emphasise the importance of continued creative expression during crisis. The digital platform itself functioned as a safe space for artists to share work without censorship or exposure, ensuring protection and visibility simultaneously.

Thematically, the artworks explored the intersections of identity, propaganda, and everyday injustice.

- **Artist A** created two projects: one depicting the life of a non-binary person in Myanmar outside heteronormative expectations, and another deconstructing generations of military propaganda through personal narratives.
- **Artist B** portrayed his experience in militia training and the loss of identity that followed the coup, reflecting the disillusionment of youth in armed contexts.
- **Artist C** produced comics and illustrations addressing racial tension, social exclusion, gender equality, and women's rights through everyday stories.
- **Artist D** led participatory art workshops in hard-to-reach regions, guiding participants to tell their stories safely and avoid propaganda; diverse ethnic participants co-created artworks later exhibited locally.

The digital exhibitions reproduced the experience of traditional galleries, creating a familiar environment for artists and audiences. They also acted as a living archive of individual stories within Myanmar's wider conflict, documenting how people interpret justice and resilience. The presence of a staff member with a contemporary arts background was instrumental in gaining artists' trust, ensuring safeguarding, and mediating between creative and institutional expectations.

Public reception of contemporary art varied. Phase II implementers observed that abstract or conceptual works generated less engagement online, prompting the introduction of curatorial videos to clarify messages and artistic intent. This adjustment reflects an ongoing tension between *artistic autonomy* and *audience comprehension*.

Profile

The Digital Art Platform collaborates with local NGOs, artists, and a social-media agency. It also connects internationally, presenting at regional and international human-rights festivals, though security constraints have since curtailed this outreach. Artists' grants and workshop budgets remain modest relative to the project's scope, and limited art-administration capacity has caused friction—over contracts, artwork handling, and exhibition management. The project's top-down management and lack of sustained relationship-building between artists and implementers constrain its long-term peacebuilding potential.

Access the full report here:
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