

Art as Peace Building

Executive Summary

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This report was commissioned by the British Council.

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(in collaboration with Lanka.pro)

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Executive Summary

Background and Methodology

Commissioned by the British Council, this research presents a comparative, practice-based analysis of how arts and culture operate in fragile and conflict-affected settings, and what their contribution is towards sustainable peace across different stages and types of conflict. Drawing on in-depth case studies in Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan, and Syria, alongside overview perspectives from the Baltic States, Colombia, and Northern Ireland, it brings together evidence from eleven countries and four continents. The research draws on interviews, field visits, focus groups and desk research conducted together with local researchers and local offices. Combining literature and policy analysis with practice-based insights, the report seeks to understand what works, under what conditions and for whom, as well as where and why approaches may fall short. Rather than establishing direct causal links between cultural initiatives and peace outcomes, the analysis follows a contribution-based approach, focusing on how arts and culture function across contexts in practice and what they make possible.



This research is situated within a global context marked by increasing conflict, prolonged fragility, and declining investment in arts, culture, and peacebuilding. At the same time, the foundations of sustainable peace, such as trust, identity, participation, and legitimacy, are under sustained pressure.

While policy frameworks increasingly acknowledge the relevance of arts and culture in these contexts, there remains a lack of clear strategies, sustained funding, and operational pathways to integrate them meaningfully into peace, development, and security approaches.

Findings: How Culture and the Arts Are Integral to Sustainable Peace

Arts and culture are not peripheral to peacebuilding – they are integral.

Cultural practice functions as a form of social and institutional infrastructure, shaping how individuals and communities experience, navigate, and recover from conflict. Cultural actors operate in multiple roles: as narrators where truth is contested, as connectors where trust is fractured, as facilitators of expression where civic space is restricted, and as sensemakers within uncertainty and complexity. They also function as archivists when memory is under attack and as innovators when institutions collapse, frequently stepping into roles that exceed any formal mandate. In doing so, they contribute to processes essential to peacebuilding, including recognition, dignity, social cohesion, and resilience.

This research shifts the focus from arts and culture as tools or interventions to arts and culture as practices embedded in communities, relationships, and lived realities across different contexts and stages of conflict.

Their role varies depending on where communities are situated, whether that is in contexts of prevention, active conflict, displacement, or post-conflict recovery. In each of these scenarios, cultural practices respond to different needs: sustaining identity under pressure, enabling expression in constrained environments, maintaining connections across displacement, or supporting processes of recovery and reconciliation. This perspective highlights that arts and culture are not applied uniformly, but are shaped by context, timing, and social conditions.

Across the cases, four practice-outcome areas are examined: storytelling; memory, identity and voice; diaspora engagement; and learning and skills. For each, the analysis looks at the mechanisms through which practices generate effects, the conditions that enable or limit what they can achieve, and what this means across different conflict contexts.



Storytelling serves as both a psychological and political practice, restoring continuity, generating recognition and meaning-making amid rupture, and challenging erasure.

Memory, identity and voice practices create and strengthen individual and collective identity, affirming dignity and belonging where communities are silenced or under threat.

Diaspora engagement sustains cultural life, visibility and solidarity across borders when local systems collapse, operating as a backup infrastructure for memory, advocacy and connection.

Learning and skills practices increase creative, cultural and social capital, building capability and continuity under pressure, and in some contexts enabling livelihoods and recovery pathways.

Running across all four is a fifth dimension: **institutional strengthening and culture as infrastructure** – the small-scale organisational, relational and digital infrastructures that enable arts and culture to contribute to peacebuilding and shape alternative futures, build trust and sustain continuity where formal systems are weakened or absent.

The choice of art form or genre matters less than the outcome pathway it serves: whose narratives are held, whose voices are heard, which relationships are repaired or sustained.

Across all contexts, these practices are already taking place – led by artists, local cultural actors, communities, and informal networks, often without formal policy recognition or sustained support. Their contributions are relational and require sustained engagement over time, particularly where formal institutions are weak, contested, or absent. They function as forms of connection, continuity, and collective action, where they sustain social fabric, preserve memory, and enable communities to navigate and recover from conflict.

Yet, arts and culture are not standalone solutions. Their effectiveness depends on broader enabling conditions: local ownership, trust, inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and ethical, trauma-informed approaches.

Initiatives that sustained local agency proved more legitimate and durable than externally imposed models. “Nothing about us without us” functions here not as a slogan but as a structural condition of effectiveness, reflecting a human rights-based approach that centres meaningful participation. The research also makes clear that poorly designed or externally driven interventions can undermine trust, cause harm, or reinforce existing tensions – making safeguarding, consent, and genuine community agency not optional additions but foundational requirements.

Finding 1: Arts and culture are not peripheral to peacebuilding – they are part of its infrastructure.

The research shifts focus from arts and culture as tools or interventions to arts and culture as practices embedded in communities, relationships, and lived realities. Their role varies across conflict phases – prevention, active conflict, displacement, post-conflict recovery – and is shaped by context, timing, and social conditions, not applied uniformly. Cultural actors operate in multiple roles:

as narrators where truth is contested; as connectors where trust is fractured; as facilitators of expression where civic space is restricted; and as sensemakers within uncertainty and complexity. They also function as archivists when memory is under attack, and as innovators when institutions collapse, frequently stepping into roles that exceed any formal mandate.

Finding 2: The choice of art form matters less than the outcome pathway it serves.

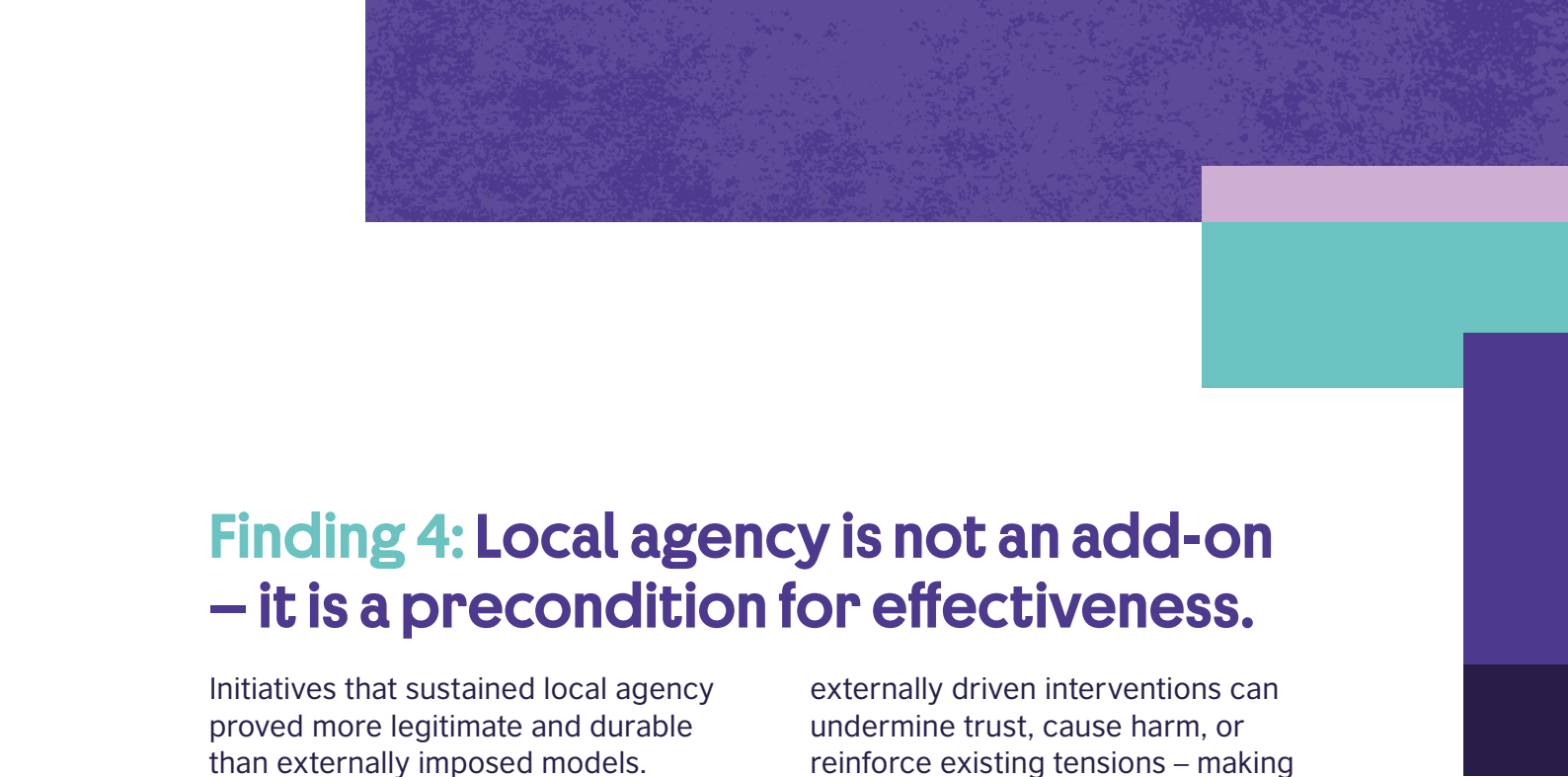
Storytelling restores continuity and challenges erasure. Memory, identity and voice affirm dignity and belonging where communities are silenced or under threat. Diaspora engagement sustains cultural life and solidarity across borders when local systems collapse. Learning and skills build capability and livelihoods under pressure. Running across all four is a

fifth dimension – institutional strengthening and culture as infrastructure: the small-scale organisational, relational and digital structures that sustain continuity where formal systems are absent. What matters is whose narratives are held, whose voices are heard, which relationships are repaired.

Finding 3: These practices are already happening – without recognition or sustained support.

Led by artists, local cultural actors, communities, and informal networks, they sustain social fabric, preserve memory, and enable communities to

navigate and recover from conflict – often functioning as the first-response infrastructure long before political stabilisation is feasible.



Finding 4: Local agency is not an add-on – it is a precondition for effectiveness.

Initiatives that sustained local agency proved more legitimate and durable than externally imposed models. "Nothing about us without us" functions here not as a slogan but as a structural condition of effectiveness. The research makes clear that poorly designed or

externally driven interventions can undermine trust, cause harm, or reinforce existing tensions – making safeguarding, consent, and genuine community agency not optional additions but foundational requirements.

Finding 5: The gap is not one of relevance but of integration.

While arts and culture are actively contributing to peacebuilding on the ground, they remain largely absent from strategies, programme design, funding structures, and evaluation systems. In several contexts, cultural actors did not frame their own work as peacebuilding,

even where its impact on peace was clear, further reinforcing the invisibility of their contribution within formal systems. Support is often short-term and fragmented, and insufficiently aligned with the relational and adaptive nature of cultural practice.

Finding 6: Instrumentalisation is a real risk – but the question is how, not whether.

Arts and culture carry intrinsic value, and when exogenous impact becomes the only driver, what is exploratory, critical and generative in cultural practice risks being lost. In fragile contexts, cultural practice is rarely neutral: when communities come

together through creative work around shared identity, loss, or memory, an intention to repair, reflect and connect is already present. The question is therefore not whether arts and culture are used instrumentally, but how, by whom, and with what safeguards.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The gap is not one of relevance but of integration. While arts and culture are actively contributing to peacebuilding on the ground, they remain largely absent from strategies, programme design, funding structures, and evaluation systems. In several contexts, cultural actors did not frame their own work as peacebuilding, even where its impact on peace was clear, further reinforcing the invisibility of their contribution within formal systems. Support is often short-term and fragmented, and insufficiently aligned with the relational and adaptive nature of cultural practice, while existing evidence and monitoring approaches struggle to capture change processes and longer-term impacts related to social cohesion, identity, trust, and resilience.

This report also engages honestly with the question of instrumentalisation. Arts and culture carry intrinsic value, and when exogenous impact becomes the only driver, what is exploratory, critical and generative in cultural practice risks being lost. At the same time, in fragile contexts, cultural practice is rarely neutral. When communities come together through creative work to

consider shared identity, loss or memory, there is already an intention to repair, reflect, record and connect. The question is therefore not whether arts and culture are used instrumentally, but how, by whom, and with what safeguards.

A shift is needed in how arts and culture are understood within conflict-affected and fragile contexts – not as complementary or instrumental tools, but as part of the core infrastructure through which peace processes are achieved and sustained.

This implies earlier integration into analysis and design, sustained engagement with local cultural actors and communities, and funding and evaluation models that reflect the adaptive and relational nature of their work. The research acknowledges the contextual specificity of its findings and its scope, and the constraints of conducting field research in active conflict settings.



Whom This Report Is For, and How to Use It

To support engagement across sectors, this report maps the wider ecosystem of actors working at the intersection of arts, culture, and peacebuilding, identifying both those who are present and active and those who are often absent. Building on this, stakeholder personas – spanning cultural relations and diplomacy, arts and culture, peacebuilding, security, defence, and development cooperation – offer lenses through which the findings can be interpreted from different sectoral perspectives. These personas highlight entry points, priorities, and blind spots, helping to situate cultural practices within wider policy and operational frameworks.

This report is intended for a range of actors working across arts, culture, peacebuilding, development and security, each engaging with arts and culture in conflict-affected contexts from different positions and responsibilities.

For artists and cultural practitioners, it offers a structured reflection on practices they are already leading, supporting reflection, articulation, and recognition of their role within broader peacebuilding processes.

For policymakers and funders, it provides an evidence base to inform advocacy, policy design, and resource allocation, highlighting where current approaches fall short and how they can be strengthened.

For intermediaries, international organisations, and civil society actors, it offers a framework to better understand, support, and connect cultural practices within wider peace, development, and security efforts.

Across these groups, the report is intended not only to inform, but to enable more coherent, context-sensitive, and sustained engagement with arts and culture as part of peacebuilding.



Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on these findings, the report sets out recommendations organised across multiple intervention areas and in phases ranging from quick wins to systemic shifts.

Across all groups, the recommendations share a common direction: culture needs to be recognised not as a complement to peacebuilding but as part of its core infrastructure, and supported accordingly.

The recommendations call for protecting artistic autonomy from instrumentalisation, safeguarding participants from harm and exposure, and building the translation interfaces that make cultural outcomes legible to security, development and policy frameworks – without reducing cultural practice to delivery tools for external agendas.

Recommendations are also phased: immediate actions focus on safeguarding, co-design, and routing support through trusted local actors; medium-term actions on integrating culture into programme cycles and building translation interfaces; and structural shifts on longer funding horizons, dedicated programme lines, and cross-sectoral recognition. This also means stopping or scaling back short-term projects designed primarily for visibility, reporting systems that reward output over honest failure analysis, and engagement that bypasses local actors in favour of more legible international partners.

The question is not whether arts and culture contribute to peacebuilding – they already do, in multiple and often critical ways. The question is whether peace, development, and security frameworks are prepared to recognise and support this contribution structurally rather than rhetorically.

Addressing this question will be central to strengthening the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts in increasingly complex and fragile contexts.

For Cultural Practitioners and Organisations

- Co-design dignity-based creative work with communities using trauma-informed, consent-based approaches
- Embed inclusion as a foundational structural pillar from the outset
- Create and sustain safe physical and digital spaces for expression
- Develop facilitators equipped for arts-based engagement in fragile environments

For Intermediaries, Funders, and Policymakers

- Enable longer-term and flexible funding that reflects the relational and adaptive nature of cultural work
- Route support through trusted local intermediaries and diaspora networks when direct funding is constrained
- Integrate culture into conflict analysis, recovery planning and cross-sectoral frameworks from the start
- Invest in MEL systems that capture process, relationship and failure alongside outputs
- Establish emergency response protocols for cultural funding in crisis contexts

For Public Authorities and Security Actors

- Involve local cultural actors in designing recovery and social cohesion plans
- Develop continuity strategies for cultural spaces as essential services
- Institutionalise cultural heritage and artistic rights protection in stabilisation and recovery protocols

Access the full report here:
<https://doi.org/10.57884/30WN-CQ12>

www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight