

## Policy Brief

# Arts and Culture as Peacebuilding

2026

## What Decision Makers Need to Know

Global peacefulness has deteriorated for the sixth consecutive year. There are now 59 active state-based conflicts – the highest number since the end of the Second World War – and peacebuilding and peacekeeping account for just 0.52% of military expenditure (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Far more is spent on fighting and managing conflicts than on preventing or stopping them. The foundations of sustainable peace – trust, identity, participation, and legitimacy – are under sustained pressure, alongside declining investment in arts, culture, and

peacebuilding. At the same time, cultural dimensions of conflict – including identity, memory, narrative and belonging – are increasingly central to how conflicts escalate, endure and are repaired. While arts and culture are already contributing to peacebuilding in multiple and often critical ways, there remains a lack of clear strategies, sustained funding, and operational pathways to integrate them meaningfully into peace, development, and security approaches. This brief argues that this is not a gap in relevance. It is a gap in recognition and integration.

## What the Evidence Shows

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

The findings shift focus from arts and culture as tools or interventions to practices embedded in communities, relationships, and lived realities. Cultural actors operate as narrators where truth

is contested; connectors where trust is fractured; facilitators of expression where civic space is restricted; archivists when memory is under attack; and innovators when institutions collapse – frequently stepping into roles that exceed any formal mandate. Their role varies across conflict phases and is shaped by context, timing, and social conditions.



# Culture as Infrastructure

Arts and culture are not symbolic add-ons or soft power. They function as infrastructure – a system of relationships, memories, and capacities that shape how societies experience, survive, and recover from conflict. Understood in this way, culture supports some of the social conditions on which peace depends: trust, recognition, participation, continuity and shared meaning. This shifts the focus from what cultural interventions do to how they work: sustaining dialogue where

institutions are weakened, preserving memory under repression, rebuilding trust across fractured communities, and maintaining continuity through peer networks and displacement ties that outlast individual projects.

**Culture as infrastructure operates in two directions simultaneously: community-facing, holding societies together; and outward-facing, sustaining visibility, advocacy, and justice claims across borders when local systems are under threat.**

## **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 organisational and relational structures that sustain continuity where formal systems are absent. Rather than the art form or creative discipline used, what matters most is whose narratives are held, whose voices are heard, and 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. Their contributions are relational and require sustained engagement over time, particularly where formal institutions are weak, contested, or absent.

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

"Nothing about us without us" functions here not as a slogan but as a structural condition of effectiveness. Initiatives that sustained local agency proved more legitimate and durable than externally imposed models. 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. In practice, this weakens continuity precisely in contexts where trust, legitimacy and social connection are already fragile, limiting the ability of arts and culture to make a sustained contribution to peace.

## **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 (i.e., when culture is only supported as a way to foster social cohesion, or enhance employability), 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. Therefore, a degree of instrumentalisation is always present - but the challenge is to ensure that all the contributions of culture are properly considered, and that cultural actors are properly involved in designing, implementing and evaluating interventions.

## **Practice-Outcomes**

**Storytelling**



recognition • meaning-making • continuity • challenging erasure

**Memory, Identity and Voice**



dignity • belonging • narrative agency

**Diaspora Engagement**



cultural continuity • solidarity • advocacy across borders

**Learning and Skills**



capability • livelihoods • confidence • recovery

**Institutional Building / Culture as Infrastructure**



networks • shared practices • continuity where formal systems are weakened or absent

## Four Strategic Implications

### **Integrate culture at the design stage, not at the margins of implementation.**

In contemporary conflicts – increasingly identity-driven, digitally mediated, and transnational – cultural dimensions are not peripheral to escalation or resilience. Heritage destruction, symbolic targeting, and narrative warfare illustrate that culture already functions as a site of contestation. The absence of cultural expertise from early-stage prevention and design processes reduces conflict sensitivity and limits effectiveness.

### **Short-term funding cycles are structurally incompatible with cultural peacebuilding.**

Trust-building, memory work, and institutional continuity unfold over longer periods. What endured across the cases analysed were not only organisations but relationships: trusted practitioners and long-standing partnerships signalling continuity in volatile environments. Peace agreements may reduce violence and development investment may rebuild infrastructure – yet without relational repair and shared meaning-making, peace remains precarious.

### **Practice-based knowledge in arts and culture is rich but fragmented – and currently illegible to policy.**

Without structured interfaces between creative practice and peacebuilding, development and security frameworks, insight struggles to travel upward into policy architectures. Cultural actors often assume roles traditionally associated with justice, psychological support, or social infrastructure – but without institutional protection, sustainable funding, or formal recognition.

### **Protection of participants must take precedence over visibility and outputs.**

Working at the nexus of culture and conflict carries ethical risks. Cultural actors often carry a double burden – living through fragility while supporting others within it. In contexts shaped by trauma, repression and disinformation, safeguarding participants and artistic autonomy are not optional additions. Where safeguarding is treated as a checklist rather than a commitment, legitimacy and trust erode. The same domain that can be weaponised also carries capacity for repair – but only if handled with care.

# What to Do Next

Culture needs to be recognised not as a complement to peacebuilding but as part of its core infrastructure, and supported accordingly.

## QUICK WINS

- Route **support through trusted intermediaries** and local partners (e.g. local cultural organisations, NGOs with good knowledge of and trust with local communities)
- Pre-approve **simplified contracting and reporting** for crisis contexts
- **Extend existing programme cycles** where possible – continuity is itself an outcome

## INTERMEDIATE ACTIONS

- **Involve cultural actors** from the design phase of conflict analysis and recovery planning
- Redesign MEL frameworks to **capture relational and process outcomes** (e.g. changes in relationships, agency, local capacities) alongside outputs
- Build **translation indicators** mapping cultural outcomes onto security and development frameworks – social cohesion, narrative change, trust are measurable with the right tools
- Create **cultural liaison roles** within humanitarian, development, and governance structures – these bridge the gap between cultural ecosystem and institutional decision-making

## SYSTEMIC SHIFTS

- **Recognise culture and arts as a structural pillar** of the HDP Nexus with dedicated programme lines
- Establish **pooled multi-donor funds** for cultural peacebuilding that survive political cycles
- Integrate **cultural expertise teams**, with a concrete mandate, within security and development missions – alongside existing civilian protection and heritage mandates
- **Co-design with affected communities** from the start – externally imposed approaches prove less legitimate, less durable, and more likely to cause harm

## This also means stopping or scaling back:

- Short-term cultural projects designed primarily for visibility rather than community agency
- Monitoring and evaluation systems that reward output over honest failure analysis
- Engagement that bypasses local actors in favour of more legible international partners
- Reporting demands that distort local agency and consume capacity better spent on the work itself

# What This Means for How You Work



## Arts & Culture Organisations / Practitioners

Co-design work with communities using trauma-informed, consent-based approaches – as equal leads, not only service providers. Document and articulate the peacebuilding value of your work, so that cultural practice can be better understood by funders, policymakers and peacebuilding actors. Build peer networks and connections that outlast individual projects.



## Cultural Relations / Diplomacy

Act as intermediary between communities and institutional actors – convene emergency coordination and connect cultural actors with humanitarian and governance structures. Contribute cultural expertise to conflict analysis from the start. Offer protected spaces for artists and cultural actors to convene, create, and work – leverage diplomatic protection where possible.



## Peacebuilding & Mediation

Integrate arts-based methods into dialogue and reconciliation processes to navigate the narratives, emotions, and identity frameworks that drive and sustain conflict. Pair artists with trained mediators; fund co-leadership models where cultural actors are equal leads. Adopt a continuum approach – sustain cultural engagement before, during, and after periods of acute violence.



## Development Cooperation

Integrate creative, evidence-based approaches into the design, implementation, and evaluation of development programmes. Adopt flexible eligibility criteria to recognise informal groups, grassroots coalitions, and micro-infrastructures. Invest in local cultural infrastructure – archives, community studios, labs – as a public good with community-led governance.



## Security & Defence

Recognise cultural and digital spaces as important sources of contextual insight – changes in artistic expression or attacks on heritage signal instability. Integrate heritage protection and cultural liaison into stabilisation and recovery protocols as a strategic imperative for mission legitimacy. Train personnel in cultural rights, freedom of expression, and partnership ethics.



## All Funders & Donors

Enable longer-term and flexible funding that reflects the relational and adaptive nature of cultural work. Establish emergency response protocols for cultural funding – simplified contracting, pre-approved pathways, flexible reporting. Avoid funding models that instrumentalise arts as delivery tools for external agendas. Adopt ethical and operational protocols and tools to ensure the protection of participants in offline and online activities.

## In Short

Peace is not built only through negotiation tables, budgets or security deployments. It is also built in relationships, memory, records and archives, shared practice and imagination.

The ecosystem at this intersection already spans cultural workers, community groups, peacebuilders, development actors and, increasingly, security and defence stakeholders. What remains rare are spaces where these actors meet around the potential of arts and culture for peace — through cross-sectoral platforms, joint analysis and shared practice.

Recognising culture as peace infrastructure is therefore not symbolic. It is a choice about how seriously the social foundations of peace are taken. **The question for decision-makers is not whether arts and culture contribute to peacebuilding – they already do, in multiple and often critical ways.** The strategic question is whether peace, development and security frameworks are prepared to recognise this structurally rather than rhetorically – to situate culture and arts within analysis, prevention, resilience and institutional recovery design, rather than at the margins of implementation.

## About This Research

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, the report combines field research with literature and policy analysis, to understand what works, under what conditions and for whom. The research does not claim direct causal links between cultural initiatives and peace outcomes; but follows a contribution-based approach, focusing on how arts and culture function in practice and what they make possible.

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