

Practice Insights

Art as Peace Building

2026

This is a practitioners' brief based on *Art as Peace Building: An exploration of practices and impact scenarios of how arts and culture address fragility and conflict*.

This brief does not repeat the report's findings. It translates them into practical questions for people designing, managing and supporting arts and culture work in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Why This Matters

Artists, cultural workers and cultural organisations are already working at the heart of fragile and conflict-affected contexts. They document experiences of violence and displacement. They create spaces for expression when civic space is restricted. They support communities to remember, mourn, imagine, organise and reconnect. They sustain cultural life when institutions collapse and often act long before formal peacebuilding or recovery structures arrive. Yet this work is still too often treated as symbolic, secondary, or temporary. Cultural practice is invited in

at the end of projects to communicate, animate, include, or “bring people together,” rather than being recognised as part of how communities survive, recover and rebuild.

The report argues that the gap is not one of relevance, but of recognition and integration: arts and culture are already contributing to peacebuilding, but they remain insufficiently supported, understood and protected within policy and funding frameworks.

The Key Message:
Culture Is Not an Add-on

Culture Is Not an Add-on

The research shows that arts and culture are not peripheral to peacebuilding. They function as forms of social, relational and institutional infrastructure. They help shape how communities experience, survive and recover from conflict. Cultural actors often work as:

- narrators where truth is contested,
- as connectors where trust is fractured,
- as facilitators of expression where civic space is restricted,
- as archivists where memory is under attack,
- as innovators where institutions have weakened or collapsed.

This does not mean that every arts project is automatically peacebuilding. Nor does it mean that cultural practice should be reduced to a tool for delivering external agendas. Rather, it means that cultural work can contribute to some of the foundations on which peace depends, such as trust, recognition, participation, memory, dignity, voice, continuity and shared meaning. .



A Note on Peace

Peace and peacebuilding do not mean the same thing everywhere. Their meaning depends on the type of violence, the history of the conflict, the language being used, and whether people are living through active threat, displacement, repression or recovery.

In some contexts, the idea of peace may be difficult to translate into lived experience, especially where communities have lived for generations without safety or political trust. Directly naming aims such as peacebuilding, reconciliation or transitional justice can also be counterproductive where communities hold different understandings of justice, rights and security, or where such language feels distant from daily realities.

In other contexts, peace can be a charged or even harmful term if

associated with premature compromise, pressure to reconcile, or the silencing of harm. Where violence is ongoing or asymmetrical, cultural work may be less about dialogue between sides and more about dignity, identity, resilience, memory, protection and the conditions for a just and sustainable peace.

For practitioners, this means that peacebuilding language should never be assumed or imposed. Many cultural actors may not describe their work as peacebuilding, even when it supports some of the conditions on which peace depends. The starting point is therefore not whether a project “builds peace” in general, but what peace means in that context, who defines it, which words people themselves use, and what cultural practice can realistically support without creating harm.

What the Evidence Shows

The research identifies six findings relevant to practitioners:

Not peripheral – infrastructure!

Cultural actors operate as narrators where truth is contested; connectors where trust is fractured; archivists where memory is under attack; and innovators where institutions collapse.

Form matters less than pathway

The question is not whether a project uses theatre, film, music, or visual arts. The question is what that practice makes possible: whose experiences are recognised, whose voices are included, and how communities connect with one another.

Already happening – without support

Led by artists, local cultural actors, communities and informal networks. These contributions are important and require sustained engagement over time.

Local agency is a precondition

"Nothing about us without us" is not a slogan. It is a structural condition of effectiveness. Externally imposed models consistently prove less legitimate and less durable.

A gap of integration, not relevance

Arts and culture remain largely absent from strategies, programme design, funding structures and evaluation systems – not because they are irrelevant, but because they are not recognised.

Instrumentalisation: how, not whether

In fragile contexts, cultural practice is rarely neutral. The question is how it is designed, by whom, and with what safeguards – not whether it has an impact.

For practitioners, the more important questions are:

- Whose stories are being held?
- Whose voices are being heard?
- Which relationships are being repaired or sustained?
- What risks might this work create?
- Who has agency over the process?
- What remains after the activity/project ends?

This shift matters. It moves attention away from culture as an activity or output, and towards culture as a set of relationships, practices, memories and capacities that can help communities navigate uncertainty, loss and change.



Culture as Infrastructure

Arts and culture are not symbolic additions 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.

The Five Practice-Outcomes

The report identifies five practice-outcome areas that are especially relevant for practitioners working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. These areas are not separate boxes. In practice, they often overlap. A storytelling project may also support memory work. A skills programme may

build confidence, livelihoods and collective identity. A diaspora initiative may become a form of documentation, advocacy and institutional support. The value lies in understanding which pathway is most important in a given context and designing the work accordingly.



Storytelling



Memory, Identity and Voice



Diaspora Engagement



Learning and Skills



Institutional Building / Culture as Infrastructure

Storytelling

Making Meaning Amid Rupture

Storytelling appears across many fragile contexts because conflict often fractures not only communities but also meaning. Violence, displacement, censorship and propaganda disrupt people's ability to narrate what has happened to them and to be recognised by others.

Storytelling can help restore continuity. Through oral histories, theatre, documentary, comics, film, digital narratives, music or community archives, cultural actors create spaces where experiences can be expressed,

witnessed and held. This can be psychological, because it helps people process rupture; and political, because it challenges erasure, silencing or imposed narratives.

Storytelling is strongest when it is not treated simply as “giving voice” to others. Communities already have voices. The question is who controls the conditions of telling, who listens, what happens to the story afterwards, and whether the process increases dignity or exposure.

Practical Questions

Before beginning a storytelling process, ask:

- Who wants this story to be told, and why now?
- Who may be put at risk if this story becomes visible?
- Is the process designed around extraction, or around care, return and relationship?
- Are participants able to decide what is recorded, shared, anonymised or withheld?
- Is there space for silence, refusal, contradiction and unfinished stories?
- How will the community access, use or own the material afterwards?

What to Avoid

Avoid designing storytelling projects primarily around visibility, donor communication or public outputs. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, stories can expose people to political, social, digital or emotional risks. A powerful story is not automatically an ethical one.

Memory, Identity & Voice

Affirming Dignity and Belonging

Conflict often targets memory, identity and belonging. Cultural heritage may be destroyed. Languages may be suppressed. Communities may be displaced. Histories may be denied or rewritten. In these conditions, cultural practice can help people reclaim narrative agency and affirm dignity.

Memory and identity work can include artistic testimony, commemorative practices, archives, exhibitions, rituals, music, performance, literature, youth-led media, women's artistic networks, or

intergenerational projects. Such practices do not only preserve the past. They help communities negotiate who they are, what has been lost, and what kind of future remains imaginable. This work can be deeply meaningful, but also sensitive. Identity-based work can unintentionally reinforce divisions if not carefully designed. Memory work can reopen trauma. Public commemoration can become contested. Practitioners therefore need to balance affirmation with care, and recognition with conflict sensitivity.

Practical Questions

- Which memories or identities are being affirmed?
- Which groups may feel excluded, misrepresented or threatened?
- Does the project allow complexity, or does it simplify identity into fixed categories?
- Are there trauma-informed support structures in place?
- Is the project creating space for participants to define dignity and recognition on their own terms?
- How will disagreements over memory or representation be handled?

What to Avoid

Avoid assuming that memory work is automatically reconciliatory. In some contexts, memory may first need to create recognition, justice claims or safe testimony before dialogue across groups is possible.

Diaspora Engagement

Sustaining Connection Across Borders

In many conflict and displacement contexts, diaspora communities also become an important cultural infrastructure. They sustain memory, visibility, advocacy, resources and connections when local systems are under pressure or collapse. Diaspora artists and cultural workers may organise festivals, residencies, archives, campaigns, fundraising, exhibitions, digital platforms and solidarity networks. Diaspora engagement can help

communities remain visible internationally and can connect those inside and outside the country or region. It can also provide material and symbolic support to local actors. But diaspora work is not simple. Diaspora communities are diverse and may hold different political positions, generational experiences, class positions or relationships to the conflict. They can amplify local voices, but they can also unintentionally speak over them.

Practical Questions

- Who is included in “the diaspora” and who is not?
- How are relationships with local actors maintained?
- Does the project support local agency, or replace it?
- Are resources flowing back to affected communities in meaningful ways?
- How are differences within diaspora communities recognised?
- Are digital tools protecting participants, or exposing them?

What to Avoid

Avoid assuming that diaspora individuals or organisations speak for all affected communities. Different voices and perspectives exist, and representation should be carefully considered, contextually informed, and accountable to those most affected.

Learning and Skills

Building Capability Under Pressure

Skills-based cultural work can support confidence, autonomy, livelihoods and social connection. This may include theatre-making, digital media, crafts, creative entrepreneurship, film, design, music production, cultural management, archiving or facilitation skills. In fragile and conflict affected contexts, skills are rarely only technical. They can become a bridge between immediate survival and longer-term participation.

Learning environments can offer structure, routine and recognition. They can help participants regain a sense of

capability and future orientation. They can also support livelihoods and professional pathways, especially where conflict has disrupted education, employment or cultural markets.

However, skills programmes need to avoid overpromising. Not every training leads to income. Not every workshop creates empowerment. Skills work becomes more meaningful when it is connected to real opportunities, peer networks, local needs and longer-term support.

Practical Questions

- What skills are genuinely useful in this context?
- Who defined the learning need?
- Are participants gaining only technical skills, or also confidence, networks and agency?
- Is there a continuity pathway beyond the workshop?
- Are there barriers to participation related to gender, age, disability, language, class, displacement status or safety?
- Is the programme creating unrealistic expectations about employment or mobility?

What to Avoid

Avoid short-term training formats that produce outputs but no continuity. In many contexts, the relationship, follow-up and peer network matter as much as the skill itself.

Culture as Infrastructure

Sustaining What Holds Communities Together

In practice, what holds cultural work together is rarely the project itself. It is the relationships, spaces, networks and people that outlast any given activity. This section asks practitioners to think about what already exists in a given context, what needs to be protected, connected or supported.

This infrastructure can be formal: theatres, museums, libraries, archives, festivals, cultural centres, schools, heritage sites. But it can also be informal: collectives, WhatsApp groups, peer networks, mobile studios, kitchens, rehearsal rooms, neighbourhood groups, digital archives, community

rituals, trusted facilitators and micro-organisations. These small-scale infrastructures often become crucial. They provide continuity where formal systems are absent. They create spaces where people can gather, speak, organise and imagine. They help keep relationships alive across displacement, repression or institutional collapse.

This means that the most important outcome of a project may be the network that remains, the archive that is protected, the facilitator who is trained, the safe space that continues, or the trust that has been built.

Practical Questions

- What existing cultural infrastructure already exists in this community?
- What needs to be protected, strengthened or connected?
- What informal networks are carrying the work?
- What will remain after the funding ends?
- Are we building dependency on one project, or strengthening local capacity?
- Are we supporting the people and relationships that make cultural work possible?

What to Avoid

Avoid focusing only on visible outputs. In cultural peacebuilding, continuity itself can be an outcome.

What Is Important

Space before the activity

Safe, brave spaces do not happen automatically. They are designed, held and maintained. This means thinking carefully about who holds the space, how safe it is, what language and form are used, and how much control participants have.

A do-no-harm principle means assessing political, security and safety risks regularly; reviewing activities with local experts to avoid retraumatisation; creating safe conversational spaces through careful facilitation and deep listening; ensuring participants retain control over their contributions; and evaluating potential harms related to publishing or sharing content.

What is safe in one location, at one point in time, may not be safe six months later. Risk assessment should therefore be built into the work, not only completed at the start.

Visibility is a design choice

Visibility can build agency or destroy it. Making work public, sharing stories, creating outputs – these are not neutral acts in fragile contexts. The question is not only whether to share, but how much, to whom, when, in what form, and with whose control.

Some initiatives moved through stages: from private and local, to small collective, to curated public, to

occasional international circulation – adjusting attribution and visibility at each step. Premature exposure to wider audiences is one of the most common sources of harm in this work. Before making work public, ask:

- Who may be exposed – and have the risks to them been assessed?
- Who controls the story – the participant, the organisation, or the funder?
- Has consent been checked again, specifically for this form of sharing?
- Is anonymity enough, or can people still be identified from the content?
- Could online circulation create risks later ?
- Does the funder require visibility that may be unsafe for participants?

Plan for continuity before the project ends

The most durable outcomes across the cases were not outputs. They were relationships, networks and infrastructures that kept functioning after funding ended. Planning for continuity is therefore not an add-on. It is part of the design from the start. What could remain after the activity?

- a peer network;
- a trusted facilitator;
- a shared archive;
- a local method people can reuse;

- skills and confidence to continue;
- safer ways of working;
- diaspora or partner connections;
- a community space, even informal;
- documentation of what worked and what did not.

In conflict or fragile contexts, institutions often form around anchors: a trusted person, a space, or an archive. These micro-infrastructures may not resemble formal NGOs, but they can hold learning, visibility and support networks together during crisis.

Care for the people doing the work

One of the most consistent findings (and one often the least addressed) is the double burden carried by practitioners in fragile contexts: supporting others while living through the same crises themselves. This is not a personal resilience problem. It is a structural one. Care work is almost never budgeted, rarely planned for, and treated as something practitioners absorb privately rather than something organisations are responsible for. Care for the caregiver should therefore be built into design, budgets and review processes. Continued contact is also care. Staying in touch, checking in, and maintaining relationships when full programming becomes impossible is part of the work – and should be recognised as such.

Build reflection into the work, not only reporting

Reporting systems that reward success and penalise honest documentation of failure undermine learning. Genuine reflection asks not only what was achieved, but what worked, what partly worked, what failed and what should change. During and after an activity or phase, ask:

- Did the design and implementation work as intended?
- What had to be adapted, and why?
- Who participated – and who was missing?
- Were spaces genuinely safe and co-created, or managed?
- Did the cultural and artistic intentions of the work hold?
- Was there space for genuine experimentation, or only approved outcomes?
- Did the purpose still make sense as the context changed?
- What should not be repeated?

Documenting failure honestly is not a sign of weakness. It is a condition for responsible practice.

What Practitioners May Need From Funders and Partners

Many of the structural problems in arts and culture work in fragile contexts are not only programme design problems. They are funding problems. Short cycles, rigid structures, visibility requirements and reporting systems that reward outputs over honest learning are among the biggest barriers to impact.

Practitioners may need:

- longer and more flexible funding cycles;
- pause/resume clauses for shocks;
- simplified reporting in crisis contexts;
- emergency funds when banking, internet or mobility systems collapse;
- support routed through trusted intermediaries when direct funding is constrained;
- MEL frameworks that make honest documentation of failure safe;
- visibility requirements that do not create security risks;
- resources for care work and continued contact.



A Note on Instrumentalisation

Arts and culture carry intrinsic value. When external impact becomes the sole motivation – culture is supported only as a tool for social cohesion, employability, or narrative change – the exploratory, critical, and generative aspects of cultural practice risk being lost.

In fragile and conflict affected 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 not whether arts and culture are used instrumentally, but how, by whom, and with what safeguards.

What This Means for How You Work

Artists and Creative Practitioners

The work does not need to be framed as peacebuilding to have that value; what matters is consent, control, continuity; co-design, revisit, share what failed

Cultural Organisations and Institutions

You may already be functioning as peace infrastructure without naming it; safeguarding in the structure not the paperwork; sequence from low-visibility to public; document including failure

Cultural Relations / Intermediaries

Underused as bridge between communities and institutions; act in emergencies not only good times; route support through local actors; longer mobility programmes, not one-offs; treat diaspora archives as living institutions

Peacebuilding and Other Practitioners

Cultural actors are often already there before you arrive; integrate arts methods rather than replacing; pair artists with mediators; fund co-leadership; sustain across the full continuum, not only post-conflict

Researchers

The gap is not evidence; it is mechanisms for evidence to travel; recognise artistic practice as knowledge; be explicit about how outputs will circulate; open-access knowledge loops; document failure

Policymakers and Public Administration

The question is not how to monitor cultural life but how to avoid undermining it; fund culture; protect cultural data by default; integrate heritage and cultural protection into emergency protocols; train personnel before engaging

How to Read the Main Report

If you want to understand what the research found and why it matters, read the **Executive Summary** for the six findings stated plainly.

If you are designing work in a specific conflict context, go to **Conflict in Context: Impact Scenarios**. This maps seven fragility conditions, from existential threat to post-conflict trauma to worldviews conflict, against relevant cultural practices, their risks, and what makes them work. It is the most directly actionable section in the report for context-specific design.

If you want depth on a specific practice area, read **Practices for Peacebuilding**. Each practice-outcome area is examined through its mechanism of change, what enables or limits it, and what good practice looks like from the outside. Useful for evaluation and reflection as well as design.

If you want to understand who else is in the space, **Ecosystem Mapping** and **Persona Analysis** are relevant. Each includes characteristics, entry points, and risks worth recognising in your own position.

If you are working in Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria – or in Colombia, Northern Ireland, or the Baltic States, the full **case studies and regional overviews** are in the **Annex**. They are not evaluations of individual programmes; they offer grounded insight from people working in those contexts, including case studies.

If you want to make a case for better resourcing or recognition, the **Recommendations** are organised in nine thematic clusters, each split into actions that might be easier to implement or require more work and even systemic shifts, each one tagged by stakeholder.

About This Research

Art as Peacebuilding: An exploration of practices and impact scenarios of how arts and culture address fragility and conflict.

Authors: edgeandstory & Lanka.pro Collective (Lina Kirjazovaite, Jordi Baltà, Kateryna Kravchuk, Anna Karnaukh, Kai Brennert)

Copyright: © British Council 2026, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

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