

Image: A performance still from Noishobde Ekattor *(71 in Silence), featuring artists with disabilities from all eight divisional cities of Bangladesh,* showcases the history of modern Bangladesh, from the Language Movement in 1952 to the war for Independence in 1971. *Photo credit: British Council Bangladesh / DARE Project.*

Beyond Representation: Five Years of Building a New Landscape for Disability Arts in Bangladesh

Disability inclusion in the arts is often understood in terms of access and participation: enabling disabled people to enter cultural spaces, attend performances and take part in artistic activities. However, inclusion within the arts also requires changes in how disabled people are positioned within cultural spaces, particularly in relation to artistic agency, representation and voice. The Disability Arts Redefining Empowerment (DARE) project in Bangladesh was developed to address this wider context by bringing together disability, theatre and society through sustained artistic engagement over a five-year period (2029-2024).

The project aimed not only to increase the participation of artists with disabilities in theatre, but also to create opportunities for their continued engagement as artists and performers. During its implementation, more than 200 artists were engaged, and disability arts cells were established across all 8 divisional cities. According to the independent third-party evaluation, over 90% of artists with disabilities surveyed reported performing in a DARE regional theatre production. These productions reached more than 6,000 live audience members and an estimated 6 million people through online platforms. Alongside this quantitative reach, the evaluation identified changes in artists' confidence, agency and voice, as well as shifts in how disability was understood within the wider arts community.

The project provided a sustained framework through which disabled artists could participate in theatre practice and develop greater visibility within the cultural sector. In this sense, DARE can be considered an intervention that connects artistic practice with wider processes of social and cultural change, moving disability inclusion from a question of representation towards greater participation, agency and the development of an inclusive cultural ecosystem.

What does meaningful participation look like?

A central finding of the DARE evaluation is the movement from training into public performance. Among artists with disabilities surveyed, over 90% took on public stage roles, demonstrating that their involvement was not limited to training or background participation, but encompassed active, visible

performance. Visibility on stage does not necessarily constitute meaningful participation. DARE's model thus created opportunities for artists with disabilities to take on performance roles and greater responsibilities within productions. Findings indicate that participants developed confidence through performance, established relationships with fellow artists and found new ways of engaging with their communities.

The evaluation study records changes among non-disabled participants as well. Nearly 90% reported an improved understanding of disability, while over 90 percent agreed that creative activities can contribute to positive social change. Specifically for women with disabilities (Visually Impaired, Low Vision, Partially Sighted), the reported changes were particularly notable. The theatre process therefore created a shared space in which assumptions about disability could be encountered through practice rather than addressed only through discussion or training. Participation in artistic practice can have effects beyond the development of performance skills, extending into confidence, decision-making and the ways artists understand their own roles and possibilities.

Inclusion can change relationships

The evaluation also identifies changes at the level of relationships and networks beyond individual participants. While over 20% of artists with disabilities surveyed reported developing sustained connections with the theatre community, the project also supported stronger connections within disability communities. Participants shared skills, knowledge and experience beyond the immediate DARE cohort, allowing learning generated through the project to circulate within wider networks.

The development of an inclusive arts practice depends not only on individual participation, but also on the relationships that sustain knowledge, opportunities, and artistic practice, with DARE contributing to processes in which participation extends beyond single productions. The evaluation highlights the value of sustained engagement, emphasizing that opportunities for disabled artists to remain connected to cultural production rely on ongoing relationships among artists, organizations, and communities, as well as continued chances to perform and develop their practice.

When accessibility becomes part of the creative process

By positioning theatre as a creative practice that challenges conventional reliance on verbal communication, DARE disrupts social norms and facilitates a more inclusive environment that addresses ableism. Instead of treating accessibility as an afterthought, DARE integrated tools such as sign language and non-verbal storytelling directly into the fabric of its performances.For instance, casting a sign language interpreter as the king’s guard transformed sign language from a mere access provision into a central element of the production’s visual and choreographic language, demonstrating that communication and leadership on stage need not depend solely on speech. This approach not only expanded the artistic possibilities of the performances but also modeled a form of non-verbal leadership, where guidance, collaboration, and artistic direction emerged through attentiveness, shared environment, and relationships. By embedding accessibility and non-verbal modes of interaction at the core of its creative process, DARE offered a powerful example of how theatre can break down ableist barriers and redefine leadership within Bangladesh's cultural landscape.

Digital accessibility in action

DARE also demonstrated the importance of adapting inclusive practice in response to changing circumstances. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted face-to-face activities, the project moved elements of its learning and communication into digital spaces. An eleven-part online tutorial series was developed with sign language interpretation and captions incorporated into the content from the outset. This proactive approach demonstrates that, for cultural organisations, the question is not simply whether content is offered online, but whether it is genuinely accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

DARE's digital response serves as a model for integrating accessibility into the very design of cultural content and learning experiences.

This adaptation provided practical experience of maintaining participation and communication when physical gathering was not possible. It also demonstrated that digital accessibility requires consideration during the design and production of content, rather than being treated as a technical adjustment after publication. The experience is relevant beyond the immediate circumstances of the pandemic, particularly as cultural organisations increasingly use digital platforms for learning, communication and artistic engagement. Designing accessibility from the beginning can consequently influence not only access to digital content, but also the quality and nature of participation within digital cultural spaces.

From Project Learning to Future Practice

The DARE evaluation does not present a definitive solution to the structural barriers experienced by artists with disabilities in Bangladesh. Instead, it brings together five years of evidence on what can develop when disability inclusion is approached through sustained artistic practice, relationships and institutional engagement. The evaluation also points to the conditions required to sustain this progress. Continued artistic opportunities, strong partnerships, accessible approaches to creative production, institutional commitment and mechanisms for knowledge-sharing are important if the learning from individual projects is to contribute to longer-term sector development. This is particularly relevant in a context where one-off activities can create visibility without necessarily creating sustained pathways for artists. DARE's experience therefore raises a wider question for the cultural sector: how can inclusive practice move beyond individual projects and become part of the structures, relationships and creative processes through which cultural work is produced?

For British Council Bangladesh, the evaluation provides a basis for continuing this conversation with disability arts practitioners, cultural organisations, researchers, policymakers and international partners. Its purpose is not to offer DARE as a fixed model, but to make its evidence and learning available for others to examine, interpret and adapt to their own contexts. In this sense, the evaluation is both a reflection on five years of practice and a resource for thinking about what might come next for disability arts in Bangladesh.

The DARE Evaluation Summary and Infographic bring together the key findings, participant experiences and project learning in a concise, accessible format. The full Impact Evaluation Report (2025) provides a deeper account of what changed, what challenges remain, and what DARE can contribute to the future of disability-inclusive cultural practice.

Further resources:

- **DARE Impact Evaluation 2025 — Summary & Infographic** *(primary link)*
- **DARE Impact Evaluation 2025 — Full Accessible Report** *(detailed evidence base)*