

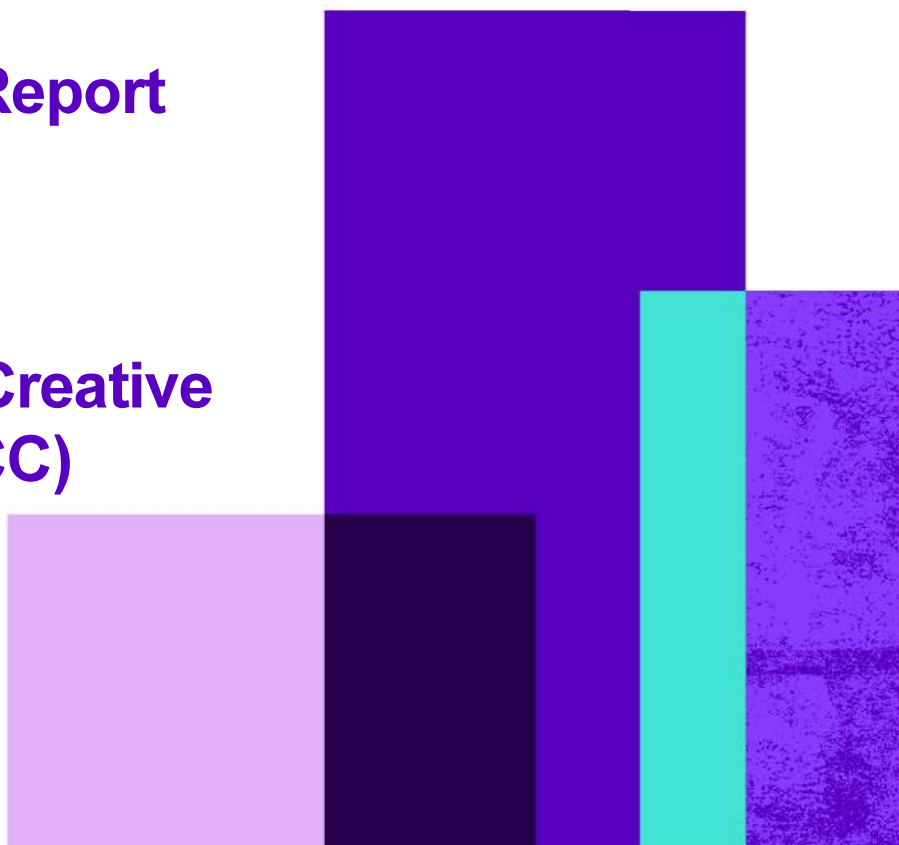
# **The British Council's Contribution to Social Cohesion through its Arts & Cultural Heritage Programmes**

**Final Evaluation Report**

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# Executive Summary

Social cohesion has become a defining policy challenge globally. Across many of the contexts in which the British Council operates, societies are experiencing rising polarisation, declining trust, inequality, displacement, and weakened relationships between communities and institutions. In this environment, the relational foundations of stable and inclusive societies are under strain.

This evaluation finds that the British Council's arts and cultural heritage programmes make a **credible and strategically significant contribution to social cohesion**, particularly through strengthening participation, dialogue, belonging, inclusion, and connections across difference. While arts programmes and cultural relations do not directly "solve" structural drivers of fragmentation, they can play a distinctive enabling role in helping societies become more connected, resilient, and cohesive.

## Purpose of the Evaluation

The evaluation was commissioned to assess:

- **Whether and how** British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes contribute to social cohesion
- **Which mechanisms and conditions** make contribution more likely and impactful
- **How the evidence base can be strengthened** to support future strategy, programming, and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods, contribution-oriented approach, combining document review, data analysis, stakeholder interviews, and in-depth case studies across five programmes representing diverse geographies: Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth, Cultural Protection Fund, International Collaboration Grants, People to People, and Women of the World.

## Headline Conclusions

The available evidence suggests that **social cohesion outcomes are shaped** less by intervention / programme type alone and more **by how interventions / programmes are designed and experienced**.

The British Council's biggest strength thus lies not only in delivering arts programmes, but in its distinctive role as a **cultural relations actor** that creates opportunities for people to come together across divides, build trust, exchange perspectives, and collaborate over time.

Its added value is therefore as much about **how it works** as what it funds: through mutuality, co-creation, partnership, local ownership, and long-term relationship-building.

## **Where British Council Programmes Most Strongly Contribute to Social Cohesion**

Overall, the available evidence suggests that contribution to social cohesion is strongest where programmes are participatory, sustained, and grounded in cultural relations principles such as co-creation, mutuality, and local ownership. The most evident contributions across the portfolio relate to the following six areas of social cohesion ingredients. These are the outcomes most plausibly connected to British Council arts and cultural heritage programming and most consistently evidenced across programme documentation, stakeholder interviews, surveys, and case studies.

### **1. Participation and Civic Engagement**

Participation emerges as the clearest area of strength across the portfolio. Programmes generate the strongest evidence of contribution where people are actively involved as contributors, co-creators, volunteers, organisers, or decision-makers rather than passive audiences.

This active involvement is often associated with increased confidence to engage in wider community or civic life, continued participation beyond the programme itself, and greater willingness to contribute to collective processes. The findings suggest that the shift from passive attendance to active participation is one of the most important pathways through which arts programmes support social cohesion.

### **2. Voice and Agency**

A second major area of strength is the development of voice and agency. Across multiple programmes, participants report feeling more confident to express themselves, share their perspectives, and take part in discussions or activities that matter to them and their communities.

These outcomes are particularly visible where programmes create safe and supportive environments for dialogue, creativity, and reflection. For women, young people, and other underrepresented groups, this can provide an important route to visibility, self-expression, and empowerment.

### **3. Identity and Belonging**

The evidence also points strongly to contribution in relation to identity and belonging. Participation in arts and heritage activities often strengthens connection to place, community, and cultural identity, while also increasing feelings of recognition and inclusion.

This is especially evident in place-based and heritage-focused work, where engagement with cultural memory, local history, and shared assets can help rebuild pride, attachment, and belonging – particularly in communities affected by marginalisation, displacement, or conflict.

#### **4. Dialogue and Intergroup Relations**

Many programmes create meaningful opportunities for dialogue and exchange across social, cultural, ethnic, political, or generational difference. Through storytelling, workshops, collaborative creation, and facilitated encounters, participants are exposed to new perspectives and experiences.

Where engagement is sustained and well facilitated, this can deepen empathy, reduce stereotypes, and support more constructive relationships across divides. The evidence suggests that repeated and structured interaction is more likely to strengthen dialogue and intergroup relations than one-off contact alone.

#### **5. Social Connections and Networks**

A further area of strong contribution is the creation of new relationships, networks, and collaborations. Many programmes connect individuals and organisations that would not otherwise meet, helping to build bridging effects across communities, sectors, and countries.

This is particularly visible in partnership-based and international exchange programmes, creating opportunities for collaboration beyond the life of the initial intervention. Although long-term durability is not always systematically tracked, network formation is one of the most immediate and tangible outcomes across the portfolio.

#### **6. Institutional and Systemic Shifts**

The most unevenly documented – but still strategically important – area of contribution relates to institutional and systemic shifts. In some cases, programmes contribute to stronger partnerships, new ways of working, increased institutional openness, and improved engagement between communities and institutions.

These effects are less consistently evidenced than participant-level outcomes, but they indicate that the British Council's contribution can extend beyond direct participation into the wider systems and relationships that shape social cohesion over time. This includes stronger cultural ecosystems, more inclusive partnership models, and emerging influence on policy and institutional practice.

## Overall Assessment

In summary, the available evidence indicates that the British Council's most credible contribution to social cohesion lies in strengthening the relational foundations on which cohesive societies depend: active participation, empowered voices, stronger belonging, constructive dialogue, wider networks, and more connected institutions. These outcomes represent core building blocks of more inclusive, resilient, and connected societies.

## What Works Most Consistently

Across the diverse contexts and programmes included in this evaluation, four factors emerge as the strongest drivers of contribution:

- **Safe and inclusive spaces for encounter** where people who would not normally meet can interact constructively
- **Participation and co-creation**, where people shape activities rather than simply consume them
- **Locally led and context-sensitive delivery**, grounded in trusted partners and local realities
- **Arts as lower-threat entry points** for sensitive issues such as gender inequality, trauma, exclusion, identity, and polarisation

## Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as a Core Cohesion Pathway

Gender equality and wider EDI outcomes emerged as a major cross-cutting pathway through which arts and heritage programmes contribute to social cohesion. Where programmes intentionally expand participation, representation, and voice for women, young people, minority groups, or marginalised communities, they can generate significant gains in belonging, confidence and dialogue.

The evaluation concludes that **EDI** should be treated not as an add-on, but as **a central mechanism through which social cohesion outcomes can be achieved**.

## Limitations

While the overall direction of evidence is positive, the strength of the evidence base varies, and important limitations and evidence gaps remain:

- Limited use of **standardised social cohesion indicators** across the arts portfolio
- **Inconsistencies in MEL approaches** and **lack of longitudinal tracking**
- Limited evidence on **long-term sustainability** of outcomes
- Challenges in **measuring intangible and relational outcomes**

These limitations do not undermine the contributions identified, but they do mean claims should remain proportionate and evidence-based. Overall, this also points to a clear need for more systematic and strategic approaches to evidence generation.

## **Strategic Implications for the British Council**

The findings suggest that social cohesion is not peripheral to the British Council's mission – it is closely aligned with its cultural relations mandate. In a global context shaped by declining trust, polarisation, conflict, and fragmentation, the British Council's ability to convene across divides, build relationships, and create spaces for dialogue is increasingly distinctive and valuable.

The opportunity now is to move from strong but often implicit practice towards a more intentional and visible strategic offer.

## **Priority Considerations**

### **1. Social Cohesion is a Strategic Positioning Opportunity**

The findings indicate that the British Council already delivers outcomes highly relevant to contemporary policy agendas on resilience, inclusion, democratic participation, and peaceful coexistence. However, these contributions are often stronger in practice than in how they are currently framed or communicated.

There is therefore a strategic opportunity to position the British Council more clearly as a leading actor in the global conversation on how arts and cultural relations can strengthen the relational foundations of cohesive societies.

### **2. Distinctive Value Lies in Cultural Relations, Not Only Cultural Delivery**

The evidence suggests that the British Council's comparative advantage lies not simply in funding or delivering arts programmes, but in how it works: through trust-building, mutuality, co-creation, longer-term partnership, and locally grounded engagement.

This differentiates the British Council from more transactional funding models or short-term programme delivery approaches. Its strongest value proposition is as an enabling actor that helps create the conditions in which social cohesion can emerge.

### **3. Stronger Intentionality Would Increase Strategic Return**

Many programmes already generate cohesion-related outcomes, but often implicitly rather than by design. A more intentional approach – identifying realistic social cohesion objectives and pathways at programme inception – would likely increase both programme effectiveness and the British Council's ability to evidence results.

This does not require reframing every arts intervention as a social cohesion programme, but it does require greater strategic clarity about where and how such outcomes are most plausible.

#### **4. Evidence Quality is Now a Strategic Imperative**

The evaluation found meaningful evidence of contribution, but also fragmentation, weak baselines, limited longitudinal tracking, and uneven measurement of relational outcomes. As external scrutiny on value, impact, and relevance increases, a stronger evidence architecture is no longer only a technical MEL issue – it is a strategic necessity.

Improved evidence would strengthen internal learning, resource allocation, external credibility, and policy influence.

#### **5. Future Growth Depends on Principles, Not Replication**

The report shows that successful programme models do not travel well as fixed formats. Festivals, exchanges, heritage initiatives, and dialogue programmes are most effective when adapted to local realities, trusted partners, and specific social dynamics.

The scalable asset is therefore not a programme template, but a set of principles: co-creation, inclusion, local ownership, safe spaces, continuity, and reciprocity. This has important implications for future portfolio growth and international adaptation.

#### **6. Arts Matter Most Where Other Channels Struggle**

The strongest strategic rationale for arts programming may be in contexts where formal political, civic, or institutional channels are constrained, polarised, or not fully trusted. In such settings, arts and culture can provide lower-threat, emotionally resonant, and socially legitimate routes into dialogue, recognition, and connection across difference.

This suggests arts programmes and cultural relations should be seen as an important component of wider resilience, peacebuilding, and inclusion strategies.

### **Final Reflections**

This evaluation finds that the British Council possesses a credible and differentiated offer at a time when social cohesion is becoming more urgent globally and that it is already doing work that matters deeply for addressing social cohesion challenges. Its arts and cultural heritage programmes and cultural relations approach help create the conditions under which trust can grow, dialogue can happen, identities can be recognised, and relationships can endure.

The central message is not to reinvent the portfolio, but to sharpen intentionality, strengthen its evidence base, scale adaptive principles, and communicate its distinctive value with greater confidence and precision.

# 1. Introduction & Strategic Positioning

## 1.1 Introduction

### Context

Social cohesion has emerged as a central policy concern globally, underpinning stable, inclusive and resilient societies. Across many of the contexts in which the British Council operates, this cohesion is under increasing strain – shaped by widening inequalities, political polarisation, conflict and displacement, as well as declining trust in institutions. These dynamics generate not only social risks; they directly affect the enabling environment for sustainable development, governance, and long-term stability.

Within this landscape, there is growing international recognition that **arts, culture and cultural relations are not peripheral, but integral to strengthening the relational foundations of social cohesion**. By enabling dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and creating shared and safe spaces for interaction, cultural engagement plays a distinct and complementary role alongside political and economic interventions.

The British Council is uniquely positioned within this agenda. As the UK's international organisation for cultural relations, it operates across more than 100 countries to build trust and understanding between people and societies. Its arts portfolio, in particular, is explicitly designed to bring individuals and communities together across divides, supporting co-creation, strengthening networks, and enabling inclusive cultural participation. This work is grounded in a clear and consistent proposition: that **sustained cultural engagement can contribute to stronger, more cohesive societies by reinforcing trust, belonging, dialogue and agency**.

This evaluation responds to a strategic priority for the British Council to **move beyond implicit assumptions and strengthen, systematise and articulate its evidence base** on the contribution of arts and cultural heritage to social cohesion. It provides a rigorous assessment of whether, how and under what conditions the British Council's cultural relations approach contributes to social cohesion outcomes across its global arts portfolio.

### Purpose and Strategic Relevance

The evaluation has three interrelated objectives / questions:

- **Assess contribution:** To determine the extent to which British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes contribute to social cohesion outcomes at individual, institutional and systemic levels
- **Identify mechanisms:** To analyse how cultural relations approaches translate into social cohesion outcomes

- **Strengthen the evidence base:** To assess the robustness of existing evidence and provide practical recommendations, including indicators and tools, to support future monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

To supplement these core evaluation questions and guide the design of the evaluation tools, we added additional sub-questions, focusing on process, differential impacts and sustainability and covering different levels of social cohesion (individual, community, institutional / systemic and cross-cutting / process levels).

Correspondingly, this is both an evaluative and a strategic exercise. It is intended to:

- Position the British Council more clearly within global policy debates on social cohesion
- Strengthen the case for arts and cultural relations within ODA and international development frameworks
- Enable more consistent, credible and strategically relevant evidence generation across programmes.

### **Evaluation Approach and Methodology**

Given the breadth and complexity of social cohesion and the diverse programmes involved, this evaluation has adopted a **mixed-methods, contribution-oriented approach**, prioritising depth in selected areas. It has drawn on:

- Synthesis of existing programme documents, data and evaluations (totalling over 100 documents, reports and surveys)
- Qualitative insights from over 30 diverse stakeholders, including senior British Council staff, programme partners and participants
- In-depth case study research across five selected programmes representing different geographies (Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth, Cultural Protection Fund, International Collaboration Grants, People to People and Women of the World)
- Comparative and thematic analysis to identify cross-cutting patterns.

Rather than attempting to attribute outcomes directly to specific interventions, the evaluation applies **contribution analysis**, assessing the extent to which British Council programmes plausibly contribute to observed changes alongside other contextual factors.

This approach is supported by:

- Triangulation across multiple data sources
- Explicit attention to context and variation
- A strong emphasis on lived experience and participant perspectives.

The conceptual and analytical framework of this evaluation is outlined in more detail in Chapter 2, but it is crucial to highlight at this point that a central premise of this evaluation is that **social cohesion is fundamentally relational**. It is expressed through how individuals and groups interact, the extent to which they trust one another, and their sense of belonging within a shared social space.

The evaluation is further grounded in a **cultural relations lens**, which emphasises:

- Mutuality, reciprocity and long-term relationship-building
- Respect for diversity and the ability to navigate difference constructively
- Co-creation and shared ownership of cultural processes
- People-to-people connections as a foundation for trust.

### **Limitations and Evidence Gaps**

A key limitation of this evaluation is that many British Council arts programmes were not originally designed or monitored with an explicit social cohesion lens. This is linked to the fact that the British Council is still at an early stage in intentionally articulating, evidencing, and measuring how arts interventions contribute to social cohesion outcomes.

While the evaluation identifies strong indicative evidence of contribution, it also highlights important gaps and inconsistencies in the current evidence base, which limited the scale and depth of this evaluation:

- **Fragmentation and inconsistency** in monitoring approaches across programmes and geographies
- Limited use of **standardised social cohesion indicators**
- A lack of **longitudinal data** to assess sustained change over time
- Ongoing challenges in measuring **intangible and relational outcomes**
- **EDI outcomes were not always measured systematically**, with limited use of disaggregated data, baselines or longitudinal tracking. In many cases, positive inclusion outcomes were evident but remained anecdotal or emergent rather than explicitly planned and monitored.

These limitations do not undermine the core findings presented in this report but point to a clear need for more systematic and strategic approaches to evidence generation.

## **This Report**

This report provides a **rigorous synthesis of existing evidence** on the British Council arts programmes' contribution to social cohesion through its cultural relations approach. It combines cross-programme analysis with in-depth case studies to identify what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Importantly, the findings are presented through a **contribution lens**, recognising the complexity of social change and the multiple factors that shape social cohesion outcomes. The conclusions therefore represent **credible and evidence-based assessments of contribution**, rather than claims of direct attribution.

The report concludes with **actionable recommendations and a practical framework of indicators and tools**, designed to support the British Council in strengthening its evidence base and maximising the social cohesion impact of its arts programming.

## **1.2 Social Cohesion as a Global Strategic Focus Area**

Social cohesion, as mentioned above, has become a **strategic focus area of growing global importance. In part this is because the conditions that support stable, inclusive and resilient societies are under increasing strain.** It is also an outcome of the growing evidence base of and strategic prioritisation for the role of culture as a foundation for sustainable development, within which social cohesion is increasingly understood as a central concern . Across many regions, declining trust, widening inequalities, political polarisation, displacement, conflict and rapid social change are weakening the relational foundations on which cooperation and collective problem-solving depend. Recent multilateral analysis frames this not simply as a question of shared identity or social harmony, but as a broader challenge to the social contract itself, with trust, inclusion and institutional legitimacy under pressure in many settings.

This broader framing matters for the present evaluation. The literature reviewed for this evaluation evidences that **social cohesion is best understood as a multidimensional and dynamic concept**, operating across individual, community and institutional levels, and shaped by both horizontal relations between groups and vertical relations between citizens and institutions. It also shows that, for evaluation purposes, the most plausible outcome areas for arts and cultural relations programmes lie in the relational and attitudinal dimensions of cohesion, such as trust, belonging, recognition, intergroup relations and participation, rather than in wider structural determinants like inequality or governance capacity, which are better treated as contextual conditions.

Recent international thinking strengthens this argument. Justino and Samarin (2025), contributing to the World Social Report agenda, describe a global erosion of trust that affects both social cohesion and governance, with particularly acute institutional distrust in low-income settings and among younger generations. They argue that trust levels are closely linked to civic engagement, perceptions of governance and social

solidarity, and that declining trust is associated with corruption, instability and polarisation. This is highly relevant to the British Council's operating environments, where arts and cultural heritage programmes often work in contexts characterised by fragility, social division, contested identities and low confidence in institutions.

Recent policy developments in the UK also underline the **growing strategic salience of social cohesion beyond fragile or conflict-affected settings**. In March 2026, the UK government published a Social Cohesion Action Plan that presents cohesion as a matter of stronger communities, belonging, resilience and managing division, while also recognising the role of cultural organisations and major cultural and sporting events in bringing people together and strengthening local pride. Although this evaluation is focused on the British Council's international work, this domestic policy development is still relevant because it shows that social cohesion is increasingly being treated as a mainstream policy concern, not only an issue for fragile states or development contexts.

At the same time, recent applied and policy-oriented work suggests that social cohesion should not be treated only as a matter of crisis prevention or state-level reform. The Local Government Association's 2024 review of sport, arts and culture and community cohesion emphasises that cohesion is built through processes that bring people together across difference in positive ways, creating shared belonging and trust over time. It **distinguishes clearly between social inclusion and social cohesion**, warning that widening access alone is not enough if programmes do not also create opportunities for meaningful contact, exchange and mutual understanding across groups. It also highlights the importance of partnership, co-design, local leadership and repeated engagement, all of which resonate strongly with the kinds of cultural relations practice relevant to the British Council.

This is consistent with the wider literature and with the conceptual work already undertaken for this evaluation. The Inception Report for this evaluation found broad convergence across policy and practice sources on the **importance of participation, co-creation, dialogue, shared cultural spaces and community agency as mechanisms** through which culture can support cohesion. It also highlighted the relevance of cultural relations approaches in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, particularly where trust-building, ethical partnership and people-to-people engagement may help strengthen both horizontal and vertical cohesion.

Social cohesion is therefore not a peripheral issue for the British Council's arts and cultural heritage work. It is a strategic concern because weakened trust, rising division and fragile social contracts directly affect the environments in which cultural relations work takes place, and because arts and cultural engagement may offer distinctive ways of contributing to the foundations of more cohesive societies. At the same time, relevant literature cautions against overly broad or assumed claims. Social cohesion is difficult to define, easy to inflate conceptually, and not straightforward to measure. This makes it essential to work with a focused, context-sensitive and evidence-led approach, one that

recognises both the strategic importance of the agenda and the methodological discipline needed to assess contribution credibly.

In this sense, social cohesion is best seen not only as a policy aspiration but as a practical concern for international cultural relations. Where trust is fragile, opportunities for dialogue are limited, and social contact across difference is weak or uneven, the relational work of culture matters more, not less. The strategic question for this evaluation is therefore not whether arts and cultural heritage programmes can solve the structural drivers of social fragmentation, but whether, how and under what conditions they can make a meaningful contribution to the forms of trust, recognition, participation and connection that help societies hold together.

A fuller literature review undertaken during the inception phase is provided in the Annexe. The main body of this report draws selectively on that review to highlight the concepts, pathways and sources most directly relevant to the evaluation findings.

### **1.3 British Council's Distinctive Proposition**

The British Council's distinctive proposition in relation to social cohesion does not lie simply in supporting arts activity, nor in applying a generic international development model to cultural work. It lies in its role as the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, with long-term presence, local knowledge, wide partnership networks, and an explicit mission to create opportunities, build connections and engender trust between people in the UK and other countries. The Request for Proposals (RFP) for this evaluation itself framed British Council's work in this area as creating opportunities for people to come together across divides, to build trust, understanding and a sense of shared values, while respecting difference and promoting tolerance.

This is important because it suggests that the British Council's contribution is not best understood through a narrow delivery lens. Its added value often lies in how it works, as much as in what it funds or supports. The British Council defines cultural relations as the building of engagement and trust between people of different cultures through the exchange of knowledge and ideas, and as a long-term practice that promotes mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. Such activities are baked-in over 90 years, with specific projects and programmes delivered in this wider context of international cultural relations.

For the purposes of this evaluation, this means the British Council's distinctive proposition can be understood across four related dimensions.

**First, the British Council operates through cultural relations rather than through a purely transactional model of programme delivery.** British Council strategies consistently emphasise trust, mutual understanding, respect for difference, co-creation, co-learning and co-delivery. This matters because social cohesion-related

contribution is often less about delivering a predefined message and more about creating conditions in which people can interact, recognise one another, and work across difference in meaningful ways. The British Council's proposition is therefore not only that culture can 'reach' people, but that cultural relations can help shape the quality of those relationships over time.

**Second, the British Council has a distinctive cross-boundary convening role.**

Across existing project materials, the British Council is repeatedly positioned as working with artists, civil society, cultural organisations, education actors and public institutions across multiple settings. This suggests that one of its distinctive contributions may lie in convening across institutional, cultural and social boundaries, rather than only in direct programme outputs. A systems-convening lens is helpful here, not as a new formal label for the British Council, but as a way of describing part of what this role involves: engaging diverse perspectives, building legitimacy across constituencies, convening across silos, and creating the social spaces in which collaboration and trust can develop. As Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger Trayner (*Systems Convening* 2021) argue, systems convening is a social learning practice, rooted in relationship-building, identity work and repeated engagement across boundaries.

**Third, the British Council's contribution is often infrastructural and enabling, not only direct and immediate.**

The approach to this evaluation anticipated this by proposing evaluation questions not only at individual and community levels, but also at institutional and system level, including how partnerships with civil society, government and cultural organisations may contribute to wider changes that foster social cohesion. This remains one of the most important distinctive features of the portfolio. In many cases, the British Council's value may lie not simply in producing a one-off event or isolated participant outcome, but in building the partnerships, trust, continuity and legitimacy that make repeated engagement, local ownership and future collaboration possible.

**Fourth, the British Council is positioned to support social learning across difference.**

This is not because every British Council programme is explicitly designed as what Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2020) call a 'social learning space', but because many of the mechanisms visible in the arts portfolio are consistent with that social learning perspective: people engaging across boundaries, taking ideas or relationships forward, developing new ways of working, and building confidence or connection through repeated activity. From the outset, this evaluation noted the value of embedding social learning approaches into the methodology, and our later work on value creation has further reinforced that some of the British Council's most meaningful contributions are likely to lie in the ways value is generated and carried forward through participation, partnership and follow-through over time.

This distinctive proposition also helps explain why the British Council's arts and cultural heritage work may be relevant to social cohesion in ways that differ from more conventional arts funding or communications-based programmes. The British Council's

own materials stress that cultural relations is not equivalent to soft power, even if soft power may sometimes be a (relational) outcome. Rather, the work depends on the development of mutual relationships and trust. That distinction is important here. It supports an evaluative focus on long-term relationship-building, convening, reciprocity and people-to-people connection, rather than a narrower concern with visibility or reach alone.

At the same time, this proposition should not be overstated. The British Council's role is not automatically cohesive, and its contribution will always depend on programme design, context, partner relationships and local legitimacy. Nor does its international reach, by itself, guarantee social cohesion effects. What the evidence reviewed for this evaluation suggests, however, is that the British Council has a plausible distinctive role in creating the conditions under which trust, dialogue, participation and collaboration across difference can emerge. This is precisely why the cultural relations lens and the strengthened evidence framework proposed later in this report matter. They provide a more suitable way of recognising and assessing contribution than a narrow focus on immediate outputs or standardised impact claims alone.

## 2. Conceptual & Analytical Framework

### 2.1 Defining Social Cohesion for this Evaluation

For the purposes of this evaluation, **social cohesion is defined as a relational and multi-level concept** concerned with how individuals and groups live together, how they relate to one another and to institutions, and the extent to which they can participate in shared social and cultural life on fair and meaningful terms. This definition is deliberately practical. It is designed to support a contribution-focused evaluation of British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes, rather than to resolve wider theoretical debates or to treat social cohesion as a single universal metric. The evaluation approach anticipated the need for a working definition of social cohesion to be developed through an initial literature review and used to refine the evaluation framework and tools, while the RFP for this evaluation itself asked for a strengthened evidence base around arts contribution to social cohesion through a cultural relations approach.

The evaluation adopts this practical definition for three main reasons. First, the literature reviewed shows broad convergence around a small number of core elements, even where formal definitions differ. Existing literature notes that shared characteristics across academic and institutional definitions include the well-being of group members, shared values such as trust, and equal opportunities in society. Framing of societal cohesion is conceived as both a process and a destination, and as operating across three interconnected levels: individual, communities and institutions. Second, the British Council's own evaluation brief was explicitly concerned with contribution at the level of individuals, institutions and systems, rather than only with participant satisfaction or short-term outputs. Third, British Council feedback during the evaluation process made clear that few arts projects explicitly label social cohesion as an objective or indicator, and that the more useful approach for this evaluation is therefore to focus on the 'ingredients' of social cohesion rather than search for one standardised cohesion measure.

This leads to a definition that is intentionally narrower than some broad policy framings of social cohesion but that is better suited to the purposes of this evaluation. In this report, **social cohesion is treated primarily as a matter of relational cohesion**: how trust, belonging, dialogue, participation, recognition and connections across difference are built, weakened or sustained through social and cultural interaction. This does not deny the importance of wider structural factors such as inequality, governance, economic opportunity or conflict dynamics. On the contrary, those factors shape the conditions in which social cohesion is possible. But they lie largely beyond the direct sphere of influence of most arts and cultural heritage programmes and are therefore treated here mainly as contextual conditions rather than as direct programme outcomes.

The evaluation also **distinguishes between horizontal and vertical dimensions of cohesion**, even where these are not always named in those terms in programme

documentation. Horizontal cohesion refers to relations among individuals and groups, for example levels of trust, empathy, recognition, familiarity, cooperation or dialogue across social, cultural, political, ethnic or religious difference. Vertical cohesion refers to relations between people and institutions, including trust in convening bodies, perceived fairness, legitimacy, inclusion in decision-making, or the durability of institutional and partnership relationships. This distinction is useful because British Council programmes may contribute to both, but not necessarily in the same way. A project may help strengthen people-to-people contact without shifting institutional trust or may help build trusted partnerships and local legitimacy even where participant-level outcomes are mixed or difficult to capture. This evaluation therefore keeps both dimensions in view.

To make this definition operational, the evaluation works with **a set of social cohesion ingredients** that can be more credibly evidenced across a diverse portfolio. These ingredients are reflected in both the report's analytical structure and the toolkit's indicator menu. They include **trust and safety; dialogue and mutual recognition; belonging and participation; connections across difference; institutional and partnership conditions; process and enabling conditions; and risks or unintended effects**. This framing responds directly to British Council advice to focus on ingredients rather than discrete indicators, and to use the evaluation as collaborative learning that can help identify which ingredients are most reliably linked to social cohesion outcomes across existing data and future practice.

This focus on ingredients also helps maintain analytical credibility. It allows the evaluation to distinguish between:

- **relational and attitudinal outcomes**, where arts and cultural heritage programmes may make a plausible contribution
- and **structural conditions**, which remain highly relevant but are usually outside direct programme control.

That distinction is essential for avoiding overclaiming. It is also consistent with the methodological expectations set out in the RFP for this evaluation, which asked for critical judgements about contribution, openness to different methodological approaches, and a practical suite of indicators and tools aligned with current MEL practice, rather than a claim to direct attribution.

Finally, defining social cohesion in this way makes it easier to **align the evaluation with the British Council's cultural relations approach**. The RFP describes the British Council's work in this area as creating opportunities for people to come together across divides, to build trust, understanding and shared values, to strengthen artists' and civil society's capacity and networks, and to support co-creation, co-learning and co-delivery while respecting difference and avoiding imposed uniformity. Those commitments map closely onto the relational definition used here. In this sense, the definition adopted for

this evaluation is not an abstract external model imposed on the British Council's work. It is a structured and evidence-oriented articulation of the types of relational change that the British Council's cultural relations practice is already seeking, and which this evaluation is attempting to assess more rigorously. This provides the foundation for the next section, which explains more explicitly how the cultural relations lens shapes the interpretation of social cohesion in this report.

For the purposes of the report, the analysis is organised around **five higher-order social cohesion categories**. In the separate toolkit, these are operationalised through a slightly more granular indicator menu which also includes process, enabling conditions, and risks or unintended effects. The five higher-order categories used in this report are: voice, agency and participation; belonging, recognition and inclusion; trust, dialogue and mutual understanding across difference; networks, bridging and collaboration; and institutional or system-shaping effects.

## 2.2 Cultural Relations Lens

This evaluation does not examine arts and cultural heritage programmes in the abstract. It examines them through a cultural relations lens, because this is the distinctive logic through which the British Council itself understands and delivers much of its international work. The RFP for this evaluation was explicit that the task is to explore, build and improve the evidence base around arts contribution to social cohesion through a cultural relations approach, and the evaluation approach made this one of the four core principles of the methodology, defining the lens in terms of trust, shared values, mutual understanding, respect for difference and tolerance.

For the British Council, cultural relations is not simply a synonym for international cultural activity. The British Council defines **cultural relations as the building of engagement and trust between people of different cultures through the exchange of knowledge and ideas**. In its longer form, the definition emphasises international trust and understanding, opportunities for individuals to fulfil their potential, cooperation that contributes to a stable world, long-term work, protection of diversity and individual identity, and bringing people closer together. It also draws a distinction between cultural relations and soft power, noting that increased soft power may be a (relational) outcome, but that cultural relations itself depends on the development of mutual relationships and trust.

This distinction is important for the present evaluation. If social cohesion is understood only as a downstream 'impact' of arts programmes, the analysis risks becoming overly narrow, linear or instrumental. A cultural relations lens shifts attention towards the **quality of relationships, the terms of engagement, and the processes through which interaction across difference becomes possible**. This is one reason why the evaluation approach emphasised co-creation, mutuality, respect for difference and process-level

questions, and why British Council feedback later asked the evaluation team to make more explicit how external mechanisms and frameworks align with British Council cultural relations practice.

The lens also matters because it helps explain why the British Council's contribution may be distinctive. The RFP frames British Council's arts and social cohesion work as creating opportunities for people to come together across divides, build trust, understanding and a sense of shared values, strengthen artists' and civil society's capacity and networks, and support co-creation, co-learning and co-delivery while respecting difference and avoiding imposed uniformity. This points to a mode of working in which the programme is not only a vehicle for content, but **a means of shaping the conditions of encounter**. In this sense, cultural relations is not an added interpretive layer applied after the fact. It is part of the theory of how the work is meant to contribute.

For the purposes of this evaluation, a cultural relations lens therefore draws attention to **several features of programme practice that are especially relevant to social cohesion**. These include:

- whether activities create opportunities for interaction across difference
- whether engagement is experienced as respectful, mutual and meaningful
- whether partnerships are inclusive and trusted
- whether participants and partners have scope to co-create, co-learn or take ideas forward
- whether the programme builds repeated contact, continuity or legitimacy over time
- and whether diversity and individuality are respected rather than flattened into a false consensus.

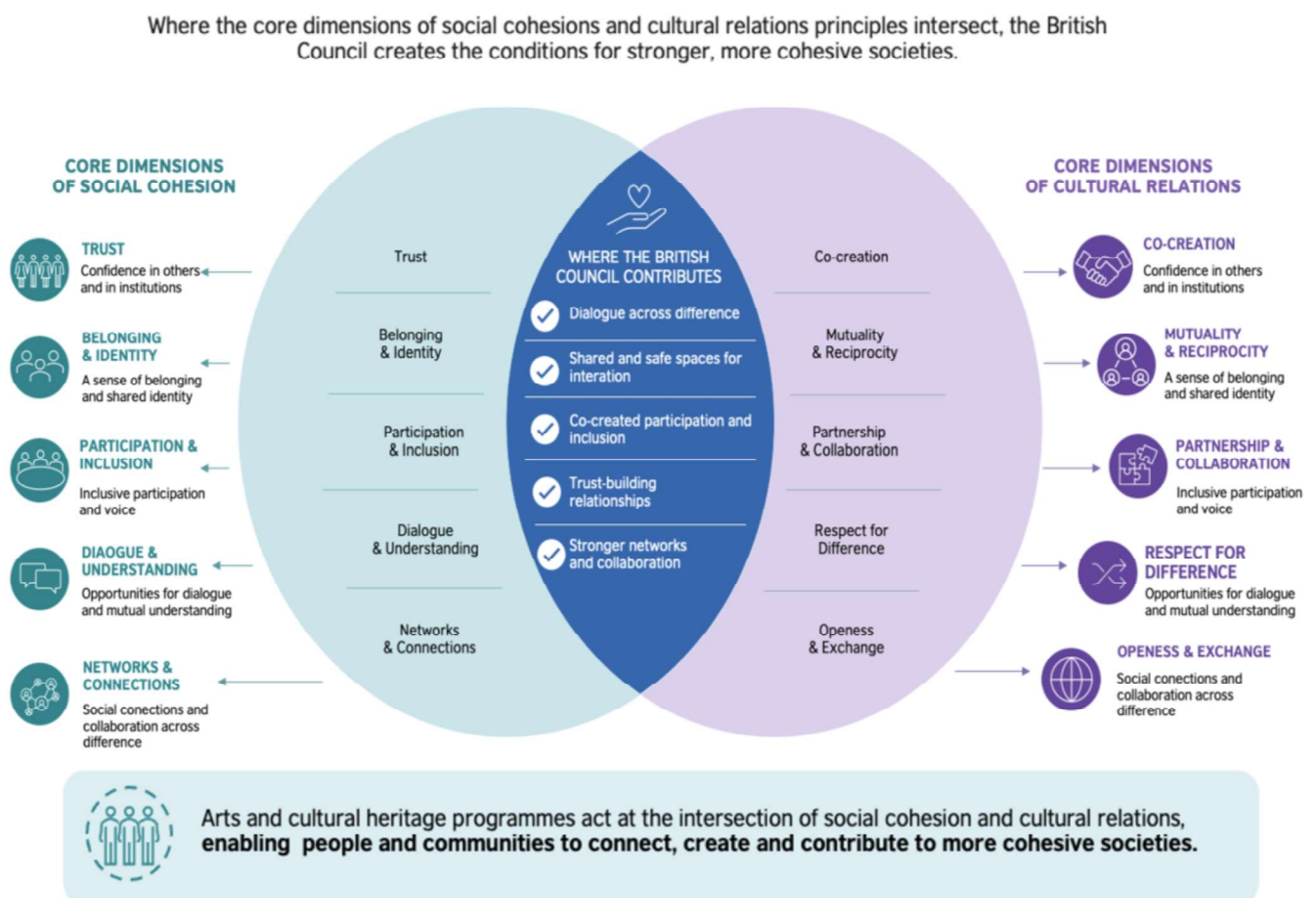
This lens is also closely aligned with the evaluation's decision to **focus on ingredients of social cohesion rather than on a single direct indicator**. British Council feedback during the evaluation process made clear that few arts projects explicitly label social cohesion as an objective or KPI, and that the more useful task is to identify which features or ingredients of cultural relations practice, under what conditions, appear most reliably linked to social cohesion outcomes. The cultural relations lens helps with exactly this: it focuses attention on the relational features of practice, such as trust-building, co-creation, convening, reciprocity, partnership quality and respect for difference, that may help explain why some programmes appear more likely than others to contribute to cohesion-relevant outcomes.

A further reason for adopting this lens is that it helps avoid two opposite risks. One is to overstate the British Council's role by treating any positive arts outcome as evidence of social cohesion contribution. The other is to miss what may be genuinely distinctive about the British Council's work by focusing only on visible outputs or isolated participant perceptions. A cultural relations lens makes it possible to ask not only what

about the British Council’s work by focusing only on visible outputs or isolated participant perceptions. A cultural relations lens makes it possible to ask not only what happened, but how the nature of the relationship, partnership or encounter may have mattered. This is especially important where contribution pathways are indirect, delayed or distributed across participants, facilitators, partner organisations and institutions.

Finally, the cultural relations lens helps connect the conceptual framing of this report with the strengthened evidence framework proposed later on. It supports the **move from a narrow focus on end-state outcomes towards a more process-aware understanding of contribution**, and it aligns well with the selective use of Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner’s Value Creation Framework proposed in Chapter 6. In practical terms, this means that the evaluation is interested not only in whether trust, participation or connections across difference are visible, but also in how programme design, partnership practice and repeated interaction may help generate and carry forward value over time. The next chapter builds on this by reviewing the broader evidence on arts, culture and social cohesion pathways and evidence.

Fig. 2.2 Social cohesion through a cultural relations lens



## 3. Evidence on the Contribution of Arts Programmes to Social Cohesion

### 3.1 Arts, Culture and Social Cohesion: General Pathways and Evidence

The wider literature suggests that arts, culture and cultural heritage can contribute to social cohesion most plausibly through relational and processual pathways, including trust-building, dialogue, belonging, participation, connections across difference and partnership development.

Below is a brief summary of our literature review, highlighting key findings on the role, value proposition and impact of arts programmes on social cohesion.

#### Mechanisms of cohesion in cultural settings

Eriksson's (2023) empirical work provides a robust framework for understanding how cultural participation generates cohesion:

- **Bonding cohesion:** internal support, safety, shared identity
- **Bridging cohesion:** connection across difference
- **Relational vs ideal cohesion:** interpersonal encounters versus symbolic identification.

In this context, cultural spaces and infrastructures play a critical enabling role and artefacts (e.g. books, crafts, heritage documents) can serve as mediators of reflection and dialogue. These findings align strongly with the British Council's cultural relations approach.

#### EU-level evidence

The European Commission's *Culture and Democracy* review (2023), drawing on 53 countries, finds that cultural participation strengthens cohesion by:

1. deepening belonging, trust and intergroup understanding
2. enhancing civic agency and participation

Outcomes are strongest where participation is active, collaborative and inclusive, rather than passive. Inequalities in access to culture represent **cohesion risks**.

EU policy work (2019) emphasises the enabling conditions for cohesion through culture: co-creation, diversity, representation, empowerment, and cross-sector collaboration.

## **Intercultural dialogue**

UNESCO's intercultural dialogue frameworks (2022, 2025) position dialogue-enabled interaction as a key mechanism of cohesion, linking conditions (rights, freedoms), capabilities (skills), opportunities (spaces, institutions) and outcomes (trust, recognition). These models further emphasise the role of arts, storytelling and cultural ecosystems in fostering cohesion.

## **Participation as a driver**

Policy and practice evidence (CoE, PHF, Matarasso) converge on the importance of participation, rather than access alone, as the driver of social outcomes. In this sense, cohesion emerges through collaborative creation, shared decision-making and community agency.

## **Cultural relations in fragile contexts**

EUNIC (2021) and other practitioner sources show that cultural relations approaches – grounded in co-creation, dialogue and ethical partnership – consistently build horizontal (intergroup) and vertical (state–society) trust. These findings are particularly relevant to the British Council's programmes in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and humanitarian settings.

Despite growing research in this area, the evidence base remains uneven and context-dependent, with stronger support for intermediate and relational outcomes than for direct claims about wider structural transformation. The sections that follow therefore focus on the current status of the British Council's evidence base, where - according to the available evidence - programmes most strongly contribute to social cohesion and where contribution is more limited.

### **3.2 Strength of the Current British Council Evidence Base**

The evidence across British Council arts programmes points in a broadly consistent direction, though its strength varies. It is most robust where outcomes sit close to programme activity – particularly around participation, interaction, and individual or group experience.

Across the portfolio, there is clear evidence of increased engagement in cultural activity, the formation of new connections, and a stronger sense of belonging or recognition among participants. Opportunities for dialogue also emerge consistently, whether through workshops, collaborative processes, or shared events.

Taken together, **the evidence shows a clear gradient**. It is strongest for immediate, participation-based outcomes; more limited for relational shifts such as trust; and weakest for longer-term or system-level change.

As the analysis moves beyond these more immediate outcomes, the picture becomes less consistent. There are credible indications of increased confidence, voice, and the development of networks and partnerships. In some cases, participants report shifts in how they relate to others. However, these changes are not always systematically captured, and it is often unclear whether they are sustained over time.

**Evidence is more limited in areas further removed from programme activity.** This includes changes in trust (particularly institutional trust), sustained civic participation, and broader system-level outcomes. Data on longer-term or large-scale cohesion effects remains limited.

These patterns reflect common constraints in how evidence is generated and captured. Where evidence is strongest, it is typically supported by multiple sources, including participant feedback, case studies, and programme documentation. By contrast, weaker areas tend to rely on single-source or anecdotal evidence, with limited triangulation and less clearly articulated pathways between activities and outcomes.

Across the British Council portfolio, data is often collected at a single point in time, baselines are not always clearly defined, and approaches to measurement vary. In several cases, evidence relies primarily on self-reported feedback, with limited triangulation.

These findings are consistent with wider practice, where arts-based programmes tend to generate stronger evidence of relational and intermediate outcomes than of longer-term structural change.

Overall, the evidence supports a contribution-based interpretation. British Council programmes appear to create conditions for social cohesion – particularly through participation, interaction, and shared experience – rather than directly generating measurable cohesion outcomes at scale.

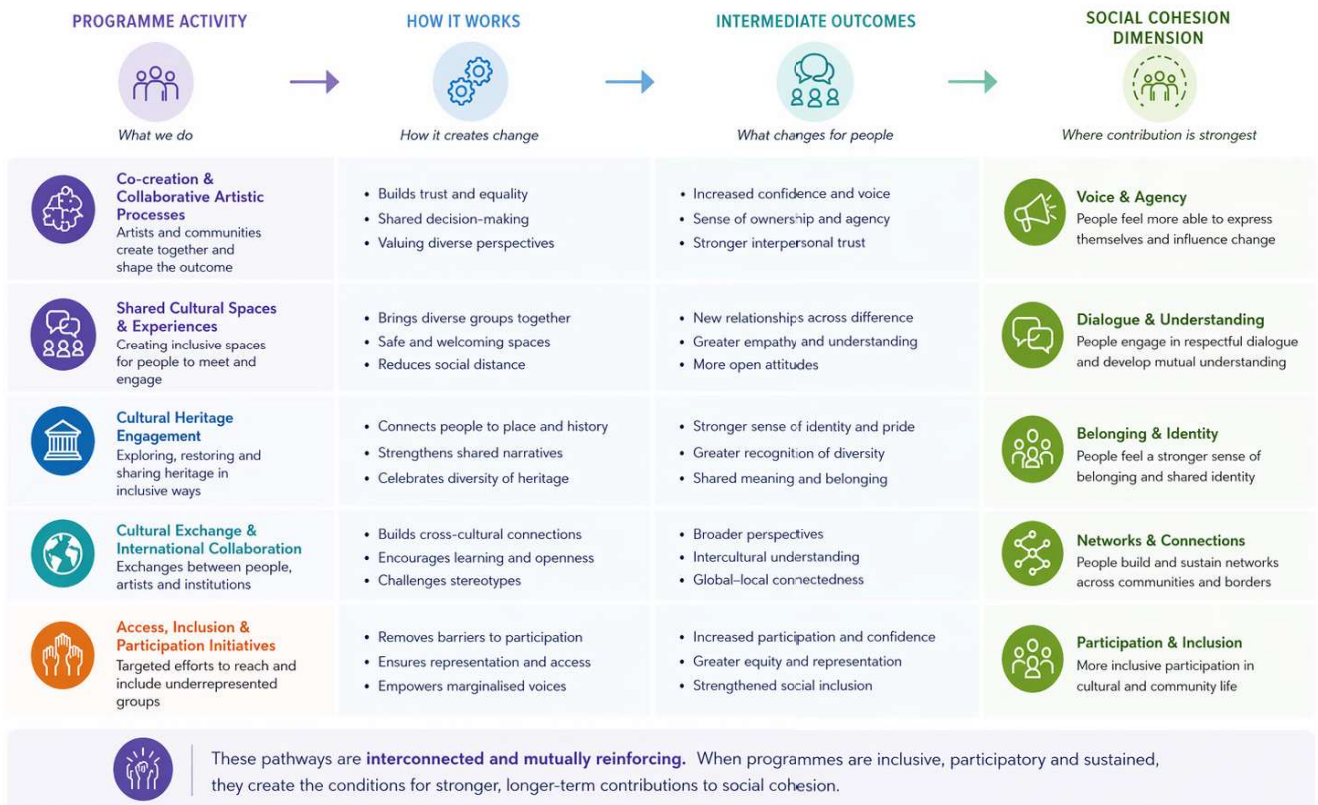
### **3.3 Where British Council Programmes Most Strongly Contribute to Social Cohesion**

Across the portfolio, contribution is most evident where people are actively involved rather than simply attending. This is reflected across P2P evaluation reports (including Lithuania and Estonia), Cultural Protection Fund findings (including Homs and Port Said), WOW audience surveys (Pakistan and Istanbul), and qualitative interviews with programme staff and partners.

Across these sources, the strongest and most consistent evidence relates to outcomes at the individual level, particularly participation, voice, and engagement. Evidence at institutional and systemic levels is more limited and uneven.

Programmes that bring participants together in sustained or collaborative ways tend to show the strongest and most consistent effects. The following outlines the key areas where contribution is strongest, with each area being accompanied by a case study highlighting key transferable insights.

Fig. 3.3 Where British Council Arts Programmes most strongly contribute to social cohesion



### **Participation and civic engagement**

Participation emerges as the clearest area of strength. Across P2P programme evaluations, WOW survey responses, and case study evidence, people are not only attending cultural activities but actively contributing - whether through co-creation, collaboration, or shaping programme content. This is particularly visible in P2P collaboration projects in Lithuania, where co-creation workshops under the *Big Small Screens* initiative involved students in producing their own media content, shifting their role from passive participants to active contributors. This type of engagement is consistently associated with increased involvement beyond the programme itself, including continued collaboration and participation in follow-on activities. Across programme evaluations and interviews, this shift from passive attendance to active participation emerges as a key mechanism underpinning wider social cohesion outcomes. *(strong evidence)*

### **Voice and agency**

Programmes also support the development of voice and agency. Across WOW audience surveys, P2P programme reporting, and interview data, participants frequently describe feeling more confident to express themselves, share their perspectives, and take part in social or community settings. This is evident in Visual Thinking Strategy workshops implemented in Lithuania, where students are encouraged to interpret artworks through open-ended discussion, with no single correct answer. This format creates space for participants to articulate their perspectives and build confidence in expressing them. Across programme evaluations and interviews, this shift from passive attendance to active participation emerges as a key mechanism underpinning wider social cohesion outcomes. Interviews with programme partners highlight that such confidence develops through repeated opportunities for expression and discussion, particularly in settings where participants are not constrained by predefined answers. *(moderate to strong evidence)*.

## Arts and Culture as Entry Points for Sensitive Social Issues

### Case study: Women of the World (WOW) Festivals, Nepal and Pakistan



WOW Festival in Pakistan (copyright: British Council)

#### **Context**

Women of the World (WOW) was founded in 2010, when the first WOW Festival took place at the Southbank Centre in London. Since then, WOW has staged more than 100 festivals and events in 45 locations across six continents. Since 2016 the British Council has worked in partnership with The WOW Foundation to support activities across South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka), Southern Europe (Turkey, Greece), the Americas (Brazil) and the UK (London, Manchester).

The festivals celebrate women, girls and non-binary people, raising awareness globally of the challenges they face and possible solutions to such challenges. WOW festivals are open to people of all genders and bring together artists, writers, politicians, comedians and activists, providing a safe space for dialogue and enabling women and girls to share their stories and tackle prejudiced attitudes. With co-creation at their heart, the festivals support locally-led ownership to reach new audiences, places and partners. Events include short talks, performances, activism, food, music, WOW Speed Mentoring, workshops and WOW Marketplaces.

WOW Pakistan was the first WOW Festival in South Asia, beginning in 2016 with WOW Karachi, and returning to Karachi for its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in early 2026. WOW in Pakistan is co-curated

by the Entrepreneurship and Community Development Institute (ECDI Pakistan) and Raabia Qadir, in partnership with the British Council. From its inception, WOW Pakistan has focused on the intersection of arts, education, and community engagement to support women's economic participation and girls' access to education and highlight issues such as gender-based violence and inequitable representation in media and politics.

In Nepal, seven editions of WOW were held since 2017 in different locations across the country, with each edition catering for a specific community and each programme being informed by local people. Overall, the festivals in Nepal focus on awareness-raising and attitude change in terms of gender equality, the representation of marginalised groups such as non-binary people, capacity-building and entrepreneurship opportunities for women as well as wider creative ecosystem strengthening. This focus is in response to the wider context in Nepal, which ranks 116 out of 146 on the Global Gender Gap Index, with persistent social norms limiting opportunities for women and non-binary people. As such, WOW Nepal provides a unique platform for raising awareness, increasing understanding and shifting attitudes on gender inequality.

### **Mechanisms of contribution to social cohesion**

The available evidence from our in-depth interviews as well as programme evaluations and project reports across both countries shows that the festivals are developed based on the following core principles and mechanisms.

- **Arts and culture as catalyst for dialogue and mutual understanding**  
Talks, storytelling, theatre, film screenings and performances provide safe spaces to discuss gender norms and inequalities.
- **Amplifying diverse voices & reclaiming narratives**  
WOW Festivals offer an accessible platform for voices often marginalised in public discourse and life and give them an opportunity to speak for themselves, including feminist activists, survivors of gender-based discrimination, gender-diverse individuals, and women entrepreneurs.
- **Cultural infrastructure and community-building**  
WOW festivals offer a platform for diverse participants (artists, NGOs, policymakers, educators, and members of the public) to come together and for facilitating opportunities for collaboration and strengthening creative ecosystems.
- **Public engagement and awareness-raising**  
WOW festivals are large-scale festivals that attract audiences from diverse backgrounds, increasing exposure to new perspectives and lived experiences. In Nepal, for example, more than 45,000 people have attended WOW festivals since 2017, with millions more reached through broadcast and online.
- **Capacity-building and professional opportunities**  
Skills development workshops, mentoring and exchanges support professional development for women creatives, entrepreneurs, and activists.

### **Social cohesion outcomes**

Across Nepal and Pakistan, the WOW Festivals illustrate how arts and cultural programming can contribute to social cohesion by providing a platform for marginalised voices and creating inclusive and accessible spaces for dialogue and meaningful interactions across social, ethnic and religious divides.

Evidence from festival evaluations in both countries indicates that they offer safe public spaces for collective reflection and action on gender inequality and for engaging with gender equality issues in ways that are accessible and emotionally resonant. Through storytelling, performances, discussions, and workshops, the festival enables diverse communities to come together to share lived experiences, challenge harmful social norms, and build networks of support and collaboration.

Available evidence suggests that across the two diverse country contexts the festivals have in particular contributed to:

- **Supporting diverse voices and agency for social change**, through providing platforms for women and marginalised groups to share their experiences and perspectives through artistic expressions and other contributions, to exchange with others (including those perceived as different) and to advocate for change. Participants in both Pakistan and Nepal, for example, report increased confidence, motivation and skills to challenge gender inequalities and advocate for social change within their communities: *“The festival helped me understand that standing up against oppression takes courage, and that leaving situations of violence is not shameful but brave.”*
- **Enhanced dialogue and mutual understanding**, through the creation of structured opportunities (including public talks, panel discussions, storytelling and workshops) to openly discuss gender norms and inequalities and increase the understanding of and empathy for lived experiences of discrimination (which are often underrepresented in mainstream media, for example). This supports shifts from stereotypes to nuance and participants across both countries report gaining a better understanding of gender issues as well as new perspectives.
- **Increased sense of belonging and inclusion**, as a result of the festivals offering accessible and safe spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds (including artists, activists, creative entrepreneurs and audience members) feel included, represented and validated.
- **Strengthening networks and cooperation**, through offering formal and informal opportunities for individuals, communities and organisations working on gender equality to connect. New collaborations and partnerships are reported as a result of festival participation. For example, after the 2024 edition in Nepal, the organisation Room To Read (whose mission it is to create a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality through education) and the feminist collective *Reclaiming Narratives* entered into a partnership to develop a book for young people.
- **Growing public discourse on gender issues**, as a result of the WOW Festivals’ high-profile nature. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the festivals contribute to a growing interest in the British Council’s work on gender and inclusion more broadly, both by individuals but also institutions.

### **Challenges and limitations**

- **Ensuring representation of most marginalised groups**  
Festival evaluations highlighted the need to strengthen participation from under-represented communities (such as rural, Dalit, and indigenous groups in Nepal).

- **Operational complexity**  
Large multi-partner festivals, such as the WOW Festivals, require significant coordination and can present logistical and coordination challenges. Improvements in logistics, communication, and programme scheduling were identified as areas for refinement.
- **Level of impact**  
Balancing large-scale public engagement with deeper community-level impact was highlighted as one of the key challenges for each festival.
- **Sustaining long-term engagement and impact**  
While WOW creates powerful moments of dialogue and awareness-raising, maintaining momentum and translating conversations into sustained community action remains a challenge.

#### **Key insights**

- **Arts and storytelling can be powerful entry points for dialogue on sensitive social issues** (such as gender discrimination, intersectionality, and violence against women) in ways that are engaging, accessible and relatable to diverse audiences.
- Arts-based engagement enables **emotional connection and empathy**, strengthening public understanding of inequality.
- **Safe cultural spaces encourage participation and visibility**, allowing marginalised and underrepresented individuals and communities to share experiences and build confidence in advocating for change.
- **Hybrid engagement models:** Digital formats introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic expanded participation, geographic reach and accessibility, enabling people from remote areas to join conversations and access festival content.
- **Cross-sector convening:** Festivals can act as **ecosystem builders**, connecting individuals, diverse communities and organisations around shared social goals and strengthening networks.
- **Economic empowerment platforms:** Marketplace platforms during the festivals connect women entrepreneurs and creatives with audiences and potential customers.
- **Sustained investment and inclusive outreach and follow-up are critical** to ensure participation from diverse communities, support collective action and deepen long-term social change.

## **Identity and belonging**

A strong pattern is also visible in relation to belonging. Evidence from Cultural Protection Fund projects (e.g. Homs, Port Said), Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth case studies (e.g. Colombia), and programme reporting indicates that participation in arts and heritage activities often reinforces connection to place, community, and cultural identity. This is also particularly evident in post-conflict contexts such as Homs, where the restoration of cultural heritage sites has supported processes of reconnection. Participants frequently describe feeling recognised and included, although the longer-term durability of these effects is less consistently evidenced. As one grantee reflected in the Cultural Protection Fund evaluation, “now the shrine is rebuilt, it was a historic moment... providing a sense of identity back to the city.” Interviews with Cultural Protection Fund practitioners further emphasise that cohesion often emerges as a secondary outcome of heritage work rather than a primary objective.

Across these case studies, a consistent pattern emerges whereby heritage acts as a focal point for rebuilding shared identity and belonging. However, the longer-term durability of these effects is less consistently evidenced. (*moderate to strong evidence*)

## **Supporting Inclusive Growth through Cultural Heritage**

*Case study: Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth (CH4IG), Colombia / Kenya / Viet Nam*

### **Context**

Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth (CH4IG) was initially a two-year pilot action research programme implemented from 2018 in Colombia, Kenya and Viet Nam. With an overall focus on cultural heritage as a driver of inclusive growth and social development, its main objectives were to safeguard cultural heritage and to support diverse communities to engage with and benefit from their heritage.

Based on the core programme concepts and the global Theory of Change the programme was implemented in a range of ways and forms in the three pilot countries to respond to specific local contexts and needs. Due to the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic activities were delivered up to the financial year 2021-22. In this period, CH4IG globally reached 42000 individuals at community level, 2900 practitioners and professionals, 23 organisations who were involved in shaping and delivering the programme, 110 organisations who participated in capacity-building and sector-sharing activities as well as 1800 policy-makers, decision-makers and leaders.

After the initial pilot programme, the programme was scaled up and continued in Vietnam and Kenya. In Viet Nam, for example, the programme between 2021 and 2023 supported 26 community-led heritage projects across 55 communities, reaching nearly 400,000 beneficiaries (including indirect beneficiaries) and engaging 46 organisations and 36 local authority leaders. The programme in Vietnam ended in 2023, but in Kenya it is still operating under the name of #CultureGrows.

Social cohesion was not a planned outcome at the design stage of CH4IG, but the outcomes included in the programme's Theory of Change and the overall programme approach relate to several core social cohesion dimensions, such as enhancing dialogue, trust and mutual understanding across difference and increasing a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Also, the concept of inclusive growth emphasises the need for economic growth which benefits all levels of society, as well as the importance of social cohesion for the sustainable development of economic growth. Heritage is positioned as a means to achieve inclusive growth, by following an approach that engages communities with their heritage and valorises the role heritage can play in terms of sustainable development. Cultural heritage in this context is understood as covering a variety of artistic and cultural expressions, from the built environment to intangible cultural heritage, such as music and language.



A training course for weavers as part of the “Preserving Cham weaving traditions” project in Vietnam (copyright: British Council)

### **Mechanisms of contribution to social cohesion**

The available evidence from our in-depth interviews as well as programme evaluations and project reports across all three countries shows that the programme was developed based on the following core principles and mechanisms:

- **Co-creation: Inclusive / Participatory / Locally-led**

Local communities and practitioners were involved from the development stage of the programme to identify, design, and implement heritage projects. This grassroots approach emphasises communities as knowledge holders and producers and thus local ownership, participation and relevance.

- **Cultural heritage as a social and economic asset**

CH4IG positioned cultural heritage as both a source of personal and communal identity and pride as well as a livelihood opportunity, thus connecting the safeguarding of cultural heritage to wellbeing and economic benefits.

- **Capacity building and skills development**

One key component of the programme overall focused on training and mentoring for local practitioners and community groups to strengthen the heritage sector overall and specific skills related to, for example, digital archiving of cultural heritage (in Kenya), cultural heritage tourism (in Vietnam) and crafts and fair trade (in Colombia).

- **Far-reaching: multi-level engagement & ecosystem approach**

The programme focused on different artistic and cultural expressions based on the specific context and needs in each country, but many activities across the whole programme aimed at engaging different levels of society and both urban and rural settings (in Colombia the focus was particularly on six indigenous groups in rural areas). As such the engagement ranged across the whole ecosystem: from individuals and communities, cultural practitioners and professionals to cultural institutions and policy-makers. In some cases, this also led to new partnerships between artists, communities and public institutions.

- **Horizontal cultural relations and mutuality**

A core principle of CH4IG was also mutuality and a more horizontal approach to cultural relations, focusing on peer learning (including regular meetings between the three country teams during the pilot phase of the programme) and exchanges across the three countries and the UK, including diasporas in the UK. This reached from ways of working on the programme to artistic collaborations.

### **Social cohesion outcomes**

The CH4IG programme demonstrates credible contribution to social cohesion through a people-centred, locally rooted approach that enables communities – particularly marginalised and ethnic minority groups – to reconnect with, value, and mobilise their cultural heritage as a shared asset. Available evidence suggests that across the three diverse country contexts the programme has in particular contributed to:

- **Strengthened sense of belonging and identity among involved communities and practitioners**, through valuing, safeguarding of and pride in local heritage: “The project creates the spaces and provides the resources so that the community members can lead the activities to promote the recognition and transmission of their cultural heritage” (case study report on the Misak, the largest ethnic group participating in the programme in Colombia).
- **Enhanced dialogue and mutual understanding**, particularly through the creation of safe spaces for exchanges between diverse communities, practitioners, and public institutions.
- **Increased agency, empowerment and civic participation**, with communities involved in the programme actively developing, shaping and leading heritage initiatives. Survey data from the programme in Viet Nam indicates, for example, that 78% of participating practitioners reported increased confidence in contributing to cultural heritage and inclusive growth, which suggests shifts in agency and civic participation.
- **Growing trust and collaboration**, including within communities (for example across different generations), across diverse communities and between communities and public institutions (which is important for system-level cohesion).
- **Increased livelihoods, economic inclusion & shared value creation**, which is key to the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources.

Evidence suggests these changes are largely at “seeding to growing” stages, consistent with a contribution pathway rather than attributable impact.

### **Challenges and limitations**

- **Depth and sustainability of engagement**  
Many interventions remained short-term or small-scale, limiting sustained behaviour change. This leads to social cohesion outcomes being emerging rather than consolidated in many contexts.
- **Uneven participation and access**  
Engagement is sometimes dependent on ease of participation and the power of gatekeepers.
- **Institutional and policy constraints**  
There is limited support from public authorities in some contexts, which also creates challenges in embedding community-led approaches within formal systems and public strategies.
- **Fragmentation of community support**  
Individual or small-group initiatives limit collective mobilisation in some cases. Furthermore, the focus on too many different communities may increase superficial engagements and increase tokenistic activities.

### **Key insights**

- **Cultural heritage is a credible pathway to social cohesion**  
Cultural heritage can increase both personal and communal **identity, shared meaning, and local agency**, supporting social cohesion both indirectly and directly.
- **Horizontal cultural relations model**  
The CH4IG model combines local ownership and international exchange, supporting both local relevance and mutual learning.
- **Community-led grant mechanisms**  
Community-led grant mechanisms strengthen local agency, ownership and sustainability.
- **Integration of cultural heritage and contemporary creative practices**  
Artists and creative practitioners were encouraged to reinterpret cultural heritage and collaborations between contemporary and traditional artists were reinforced, which enhances intergenerational dialogue, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the continued renewal of cultural expressions.

- **Bridging and linking across differences and diverse stakeholders are critical**

Collaboration across diverse communities, practitioners and institutions is a key mechanism for strengthening and sustaining social cohesion.

- **Economic relevance strengthens social cohesion outcomes**

Linking cultural heritage to increased livelihoods supports the perceived value of collective assets and the sustainability of programme interventions.

### **Dialogue and intergroup relations**

Programmes consistently create opportunities for dialogue and exchange. Evidence from case studies and interviews indicates that participants encounter different perspectives and, in some cases, engage in meaningful interaction across social or cultural differences. This is particularly visible in collaborative formats, such as the DokuFest / Scottish Documentary Institute *Breaking Borders* initiative, where filmmakers from different countries collaborated over an extended period, creating sustained opportunities for exchange and dialogue. Across case studies and interview material, a clear pattern emerges: sustained and facilitated interaction is more likely to lead to meaningful dialogue than one-off engagement. Evidence of shifts in trust or intergroup relations exists, but remains uneven and largely qualitative. (*moderate evidence*)

## Cultural Space and Heritage as Platforms for Social Cohesion in Fragile Contexts

*Comparative case study: Port Said (Egypt) and Homs (Syria)*



Tura Heritage Guardian group in the theatre, 2025.

Photo courtesy of Thurathuna

### **Context**

This comparative case study examines two heritage-led interventions supported through the Cultural Protection Fund: the Recovery Lab initiative centred around Abbas Bazaar in Port Said, Egypt, and the restoration and activation of the Ghassania Theatre in Homs, Syria.

Both cases operate in contexts marked by fragmentation, marginalisation, and, in the case of Homs, prolonged conflict. While differing significantly in scale, maturity, and modality, they offer complementary insights into how cultural spaces and heritage can contribute to social cohesion through relational processes.

The analysis suggests that, rather than directly producing social cohesion, both interventions create conditions under which cohesion can emerge, particularly through participation, shared experience, and the reactivation of public space.

### **Port Said (Egypt)**

Port Said has experienced long-standing urban and socio-economic challenges, including the gradual deterioration of its historic fabric and the weakening of connections between communities and the built environment. Heritage assets such as Abbas Bazaar have suffered from neglect, reflecting broader patterns of marginalisation and disconnection within the urban landscape.

### **Homs (Syria)**

Homs represents a highly fragile, post-conflict environment, where years of violence have resulted in widespread destruction, displacement, and deep social fragmentation. Cultural infrastructure has been severely damaged, and public spaces for interaction have largely disappeared. In this context, rebuilding cultural sites is closely intertwined with broader processes of social recovery and reconciliation.

#### ***Port Said: Recovery Lab and Abbas Bazaar***

The Port Said intervention is best understood as an **ongoing, process-oriented initiative**, rather than a completed regeneration project. The Recovery Lab adopts a capacity-building and participatory approach to urban heritage, using Abbas Bazaar as a **pilot site and catalyst** for broader engagement.

Activities have included:

- workshops and training on heritage and urban recovery
- engagement with local stakeholders and communities
- exploration of adaptive reuse and conservation approaches.

The focus has been less on the full physical restoration of the Bazaar and more on **initiating dialogue, building skills, and testing collaborative models of urban regeneration**.

#### ***Homs: Ghassania Theatre***

In Homs, the intervention involved the restoration and activation of a historic theatre, heavily damaged during the conflict. Restoration was completed over approximately 18 months, followed by a wide range of cultural, educational, and community activities.

Key features include:

- restoration using traditional, climate-adapted methods
- use of sustainable solutions (e.g. solar energy, water collection)
- activation of the space through training, workshops, performances, and community programmes.

The theatre has since become a functioning cultural space, open to diverse groups and actively used by the community.

### **Mechanisms of contribution to social cohesion**

Across both cases, contribution to social cohesion appears to operate through a set of recurring mechanisms:

#### **a) *Reactivation of Shared Spaces***

Both interventions centre on reclaiming physical spaces—whether partially (Abbas Bazaar) or more fully (Ghassania Theatre)—as sites of encounter. In contexts where public space has been eroded or inaccessible, this reactivation is a critical first step in enabling social interaction.

#### **b) *Participation and Co-creation***

In both cases, community involvement plays a central role. In Port Said, this is expressed through participatory workshops and stakeholder engagement. In Homs, participation extends further, with community members contributing to:

- restoration processes (e.g. providing historical knowledge and documentation)
- programme delivery and ongoing activities.

This participatory approach appears to support agency and ownership, which are key components of social cohesion.

#### **c) *Dialogue and Shared Experience***

Activities in both settings create opportunities for dialogue, whether structured (e.g. workshops) or informal (e.g. shared events and gatherings). In Homs, in particular, programmes have enabled individuals from different backgrounds to share personal experiences, including trauma, in collective settings. Participants described how “everyone was crying together, supporting each other... as if they are one family,” pointing to the emergence of trust and shared identity.

These processes contribute to:

- mutual recognition
- reduction of social isolation
- the formation of shared narratives.

#### **d) *Reconstruction of Identity and Belonging***

Heritage plays a central role in reconnecting individuals to place. In both cases, interventions draw on cultural memory and historic identity as a means of:

- restoring pride in local heritage
- reinforcing a sense of belonging
- reframing damaged or neglected spaces as shared assets.

## Social cohesion outcomes

### **a) Trust (interpersonal and institutional)**

In Homs, there is strong qualitative evidence of interpersonal trust emerging through shared activities. Participants describe collective experiences of emotional exchange and mutual support, suggesting the rebuilding of trust across social divides.

In Port Said, evidence is more limited but indicates emerging trust between stakeholders, particularly through collaboration between community actors and technical experts.

### **b) Sense of Belonging and Inclusion**

Both cases demonstrate contributions to belonging, albeit at different stages:

- In Homs, the theatre has become a recognised community hub, described as “a place for everyone”, where diverse groups gather and participate in activities
- In Port Said, the Bazaar functions more as a symbolic entry point, with early indications that heritage-led engagement can reconnect communities to their urban environment.

### **c) Dialogue and Mutual Understanding**

Dialogue is a central outcome in both contexts:

- In Homs, structured activities (e.g. training, storytelling, heritage walks) facilitate exchanges across different social, religious, and generational groups.
- In Port Said, dialogue emerges through workshops and collaborative processes, including efforts “to bring these people... with a lot of conflict in interests... into one place and create an environment where they can constructively talk with each other”.

### **d) Social Capital (bridging, bonding, linking)**

The interventions appear to generate different forms of social capital:

- **Bonding:** Within participant groups, particularly in Homs through repeated engagement
- **Bridging:** Across diverse social and religious groups, especially in shared activities
- **Linking:** Between communities and institutions, particularly evident in Port Said through collaboration with academic and professional actors.

### **e) Civic Participation and Agency**

Both cases support increased participation:

- In Homs, participants engage as volunteers, trainees, and co-creators of activities

- In Port Said, stakeholders are involved in shaping discussions around urban heritage and recovery.

These forms of engagement suggest growing local agency, although evidence of sustained civic participation remains limited.

### **Challenges and limitations**

The strength of evidence varies significantly between the two cases:

- **Homs** provides rich qualitative evidence, including direct testimonies and observable changes in participation and interaction. However, this evidence remains largely anecdotal and short-term
- **Port Said** offers more limited evidence, reflecting the early-stage nature of the intervention and its focus on process rather than outcomes.

Across both cases, key limitations include:

- lack of systematic measurement of social cohesion outcomes
- limited longitudinal data
- difficulty isolating the contribution of the interventions from broader contextual dynamics.

Taken together, these case studies illustrate how British Council-supported interventions can play a meaningful enabling role in fostering the conditions for social cohesion to emerge—particularly through participation, shared experience, and the reactivation of inclusive cultural spaces—even in contexts where direct attribution of outcomes is inherently complex.

### **Key insights**

This comparative case highlights several important insights:

- **Indirect but critical role of the British Council**

In both contexts, the British Council operates primarily as an enabling actor. Its role is not directly visible in programme delivery but is fundamental in:

- providing financial support
- enabling locally led interventions
- supporting work in sensitive or high-risk environments.

In Syria, this role was necessarily discreet, with partners deliberately limiting visibility due to security concerns. This underscores the importance of flexible and context-sensitive funding models in fragile settings.

- **Cultural space as an entry point for cohesion**

Both cases demonstrate that restoring or activating cultural spaces can serve as a powerful entry point for rebuilding social relations, particularly in contexts where other forms of engagement may be limited or contested.

- **Participation as a central driver**

The most consistent pathway across both cases is:

participation → interaction → shared experience → trust → cohesion.

This suggests that the value of such interventions lies less in physical outputs and more in the processes they enable.

- **Importance of context and time**

The comparison also highlights that:

- in early-stage interventions (Port Said), impacts are primarily process-oriented
- in more mature interventions (Homs), relational outcomes become more visible.

This reinforces the need for longer-term engagement and adaptive approaches.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how heritage and cultural space can function as platforms for social cohesion in fragile contexts. While the strength and visibility of outcomes vary, both interventions demonstrate that **creating spaces for participation, dialogue, and shared experience is central to rebuilding social relations**. Rather than offering definitive evidence of impact, they provide compelling examples of how cohesion can begin to emerge through locally led, culturally grounded processes, supported by enabling actors operating with sensitivity to context.

### **Social connections and networks**

There is also evidence of new relationships and networks forming. Participants often connect with people they would not otherwise encounter, and some of these connections continue beyond the programme. This is especially apparent in international exchange and partnership-based programmes, where networks extend across geographies and sectors. While this points to the development of social capital, these outcomes are not always systematically tracked over time.

For example, P2P partnership projects bring together organisations and practitioners across countries, creating opportunities for ongoing collaboration beyond the initial programme. In some cases, these relationships lead to further joint initiatives or sustained professional networks. Interviews with British Council staff and programme leads highlight the difficulty of translating programme-level activity into sustained institutional or system-level change, particularly given the short-term nature of many interventions and limitations in monitoring frameworks. Across programme reporting and interviews, these connections are frequently described as one of the most immediate and tangible outcomes, although their long-term durability is not consistently tracked. (*moderate evidence*)

## Cultural Co-creation and International Exchange as Pathways to Social Cohesion

Case study: *DokuFest & Scottish Documentary Institute – Breaking Borders (Kosovo–UK)*



Breaking Borders, 2025.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DKSCEzAIFpZ/>

### **Context**

*Breaking Borders*, supported through the British Council's International Collaboration Grants, brings together emerging filmmakers from Kosovo and Scotland in a structured residency focused on co-creation, cultural exchange, and socially engaged storytelling.

The programme moves beyond traditional exchange models towards **shared authorship**, requiring participants to collaborate on joint documentary projects. The available evidence suggests that it contributes to social cohesion primarily through **dialogue, collaboration, and network-building**, rather than directly measurable outcomes.

The programme responds to a wider context of increasing social and political polarisation, where cross-cultural collaboration is positioned as a means of fostering understanding. It builds on two established ecosystems:

- DokuFest, a leading documentary platform in Southeast Europe with a focus on emerging talent
- The Scottish Documentary Institute, with expertise in mentorship and international production.

Participants are drawn from existing talent programmes, enabling collaboration between practitioners already embedded in their local contexts.

The programme is delivered as a **19-day residency in Prizren**, bringing together eight filmmakers (four from each country).

It is structured in two phases:

- **Cultural immersion:** workshops, screenings, and discussions to build relationships and shared understanding
- **Co-production:** mixed teams develop and produce short documentaries on the theme *“Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World”*.

A defining feature is the emphasis on **collaboration over authorship**, requiring participants to negotiate ideas and produce work collectively.

### **Mechanisms of contribution to social cohesion**

Contribution to social cohesion operates through:

- **Intercultural exchange:** participants engage directly with different perspectives and contexts
- **Co-creation:** shared authorship requires negotiation, trust, and mutual reliance
- **Collective storytelling:** films address social and political issues, creating shared frames of understanding
- **Network formation:** participants build ongoing professional and social connections across contexts.

These mechanisms align with established pathways linking participation, interaction, and shared experience to cohesion outcomes.

### **Social cohesion outcomes**

Evidence indicates contributions across several cohesion dimensions:

- **Dialogue and mutual understanding:** facilitated through workshops and collaborative production
- **Trust and collaboration:** developed through sustained co-creation processes
- **Belonging:** participants operate within a shared, intensive creative environment
- **Social capital:** new bridging and linking connections between individuals and institutions
- **Agency:** participants shape projects and engage with social issues through their work.

### **Challenges and limitations**

Evidence is primarily programme-level and descriptive, with limited direct data on participant experiences or longer-term outcomes.

There is:

- no systematic measurement of attitudinal change
- limited follow-up on sustained collaboration
- no longitudinal data.

The most credible interpretation is that the programme **creates conditions for social cohesion to emerge**, rather than producing directly attributable outcomes.

#### Key insights

- **Co-creation strengthens relational outcomes:** shared authorship deepens engagement beyond exchange
- **International collaboration builds bridging social capital:** structured interaction supports connections across contexts
- **The British Council plays an enabling role:** supporting partnerships rather than delivering directly
- **Process is central:** relational outcomes are driven by collaboration, not just outputs
- **Evidence gaps remain:** stronger tools are needed to capture relational and longer-term impacts.

*Breaking Borders* demonstrates how international co-creation can contribute to social cohesion by enabling dialogue, trust, and collaboration across cultural contexts. Its value lies primarily in the **processes it creates**, rather than in directly measurable outcomes.

## **Institutional and systemic shifts**

At a broader level, some programmes contribute to partnerships, capacity-building, and engagement between communities and institutions. Evidence from P2P reporting, Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth evaluation findings, and Cultural Protection Fund case studies indicates that organisations may adapt their approaches or expand engagement with new communities. For example, Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth projects in Colombia demonstrate how partnerships with local organisations can support more inclusive, community-led approaches to heritage and development. However, across the evidence base, these effects are uneven and not consistently evidenced. There is limited systematic data linking programme activity to wider structural change, and pathways from programme activity to institutional or system-level outcomes remain underdeveloped. (*emerging evidence*).

### **Arts, Culture and Local Partnership in Politically Sensitive Contexts**

*Case study: People to People, Estonia / Lithuania / Latvia (2016-2026)*



Station Narva 2023: Bazzookas open-air, free concert. © Juri Vsvitsev

Source: <https://yourope.org/know-how/accessibility-station-narva-ee-case-study/>

#### **Context**

People to People (P2P) appears to be one of the clearest and longest-running Baltic examples in this evaluation of British Council work using arts, culture, education, participation, and local partnership in politically sensitive contexts marked by mistrust,

separation, and wider pressures linked to polarisation and resilience. The available material suggests that it is best understood not as a single fixed intervention, but as a broad, adaptive, partner-led portfolio that took different shapes in Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Its value as a case lies both in what it suggests about contribution to social cohesion-related building blocks and in what it reveals about the limits of the current evidence base.

Across the material, P2P can be reconstructed as a long-running Baltic programme working in contexts where Russian-speaking and majority-language-speaking communities were living with differing degrees of distance, mistrust, partial parallelism, and vulnerability to polarisation. The most consistent rationale visible in the material is relational, bringing people into safer contact across difference, widening participation, and building conditions for stronger relationships and resilience. At the same time, staff accounts and some programme framing suggest that social cohesion aims overlapped, at least in some phases, with resilience, anti-disinformation, or wider security-related rationales. That overlap seems real, but the precise balance between these layers is not fully settled in the available documentation.

The programme does not appear to have been standardised across countries. Rather, country-level evidence points to contextual adaptation: a strongly place-based and trust-oriented pattern in Estonia, a more institution-led model in Lithuania, and a broader mixed portfolio in Latvia linking arts with civic participation, education, community activation, and resilience-oriented strands. This variation is important, because it suggests that the P2P umbrella held together different national pathways rather than one uniform model of change.

In practical terms, this portfolio included a mix of arts, cultural, educational and partnership-based activity rather than one standard programme format. In Estonia, examples included place-based and participatory cultural activity in and around Narva, such as Station Narva, Narva Art Residency, 100% Narva, and Garage48-related work, which combined cultural programming, representation, local dialogue and civic participation. In Lithuania, the programme more often worked through institutional and pedagogic formats, including Visual Thinking Strategy workshops, Dialogue Communities, the Roma youth exhibition, and Big Small Screens, using art, discussion and creative media as routes into dialogue, reflection and co-creation. In Latvia, the portfolio was broader and more mixed, spanning arts, civic participation, community activation, language-transition support, education and resilience-related work, often using cultural and educational institutions as platforms for local engagement. This diversity of formats matters because it helps explain both the strengths of the case and the difficulty of treating P2P as one single intervention.

### **Mechanisms of contribution to social cohesion**

The most credible reading of the case is that P2P contributed to social cohesion-related building blocks rather than demonstrating broad social cohesion outcomes at societal scale. Across the material reviewed, the strongest shared contribution areas are safer contact across difference, dialogue, communication, participation, collaboration, co-creation, openness, relationship-building, and, in some contexts, trust, belonging, voice,

and institutional openness. These are better supported than any claim of large-scale transformation.

Arts and culture appear important within this contribution story, but not as a single mechanism. The available material suggests that they often functioned as lower-threat, engaging, and emotionally resonant entry points that made difficult issues more discussable and supported co-creation rather than one-way messaging. The case also suggests that contribution often travelled not only through individual participants, but through organisational relationships, trusted intermediaries, and more open or collaborative institutional practices. This is especially visible where schools, museums, libraries, local cultural organisations, and community institutions acted as carriers of dialogue, inclusion, and repeated contact.

A further pattern is that longer-term, iterative, locally anchored work appears more plausible as a route to contribution than one-off activity. Estonia provides the clearest example of this, but similar logic is visible in Lithuania's institutionally embedded work and in Latvia's broader civic and community infrastructures. This does not prove that duration alone causes stronger outcomes, but it does suggest that repeated engagement, trusted local partners, and accumulated relationships are central to the strongest contribution stories in the case.

### **Social cohesion outcomes**

In Estonia, the available material points most clearly to a place-sensitive, Narva-centred portfolio, with examples including Station Narva, Narva Art Residency, 100% Narva, and Garage48-related work. Here the strongest mechanisms appear to be trusted local mediation, repeated local presence, participatory representation, and cultural activity embedded in a wider civic and place-based ecosystem. The strongest social cohesion-relevant signals are trust-building, dialogue, inclusive participation, belonging, and relationship-building, though some broader claims remain more inferential than verified.

In Lithuania, the material suggests one of the stronger cases for institutional embedding, with schools, museums, libraries, galleries, culture centres, and specialist partners acting as the main carriers of practice. Examples such as Visual Thinking Strategy, Dialogue Communities, the Roma youth exhibition, and Big Small Screens point to art as a safe dialogic space, co-creation and narrative ownership, and creative media work as a route into collaboration, inclusion, and openness to otherness. Compared with Estonia, trust is less foregrounded; compared with Latvia, the case has a stronger institutional and pedagogic character.

In Latvia, the country evidence points to the broadest and most mixed portfolio, spanning arts, civic participation, community activation, language-transition support, education, and media literacy or resilience-related work. The clearest mechanisms are arts as an indirect route into difficult topics, community or applied theatre and co-creation, and cultural or educational institutions as civic infrastructure. Latvia is also the clearest case on framing tensions, especially the distinction between cohesion and integration, and on the overlap between social cohesion, democratic participation, and resilience against polarisation or disinformation.

### **Challenges and limitations**

The P2P evidence base is layered and fairly substantial in places, but persistently uneven. Across the case, the main evidence types include interview accounts, project proposals, project reports, donor or public-facing summaries, surveys and questionnaires, change stories, reflective or observer material, and country-level assessments. This is enough to reconstruct broad delivery logic, identify flagship examples, and outline plausible contribution pathways. It is much less secure when the question shifts to durable attitudinal change, comparison across strands, or isolating the specific contribution of arts from wider civic, educational, and contextual dynamics.

The limitations are consistent across countries. Much of the evidence is self-report, partner report, retrospective staff interpretation, or narrative contribution evidence rather than independent verification. Project proposals evidence intent more than achievement. Project reports often show activity and reach more clearly than long-term relational change. Survey evidence is frequently short-term and self-reported. Narrative change stories are useful for contribution logic, but not sufficient on their own for strong causal claims. This means the most defensible claims are cautious contribution claims at project, community, institutional, and meso levels, rather than claims of wide societal impact.

One persistent tension is between the conceptual and strategic. The material suggests that P2P sat at the intersection of social cohesion, resilience, participation, education, and in some instances anti-disinformation logic. That plurality may have been a practical strength, because it allowed context-sensitive delivery, but it also means the programme does not yield one neat, singular theory of change. Different strands appear to have worked through different pathways, interpersonal, civic, institutional, or literacy-related, and the evidence does not justify flattening these into one simplified account.

A second challenge concerns evidence and MEL. The case repeatedly shows a mismatch between the kinds of relational and cumulative change the programme may plausibly have supported and the kinds of evidence most commonly captured through conventional reporting. This is especially visible in arts-based and short-form interventions, and in Latvia's explicit reflections on weak evidence around performances. More broadly, the case study suggests that partner evidence capacity and the design of lighter but better-targeted tools are likely to matter if future programmes are to evidence contribution more credibly without creating excessive reporting burden.

### **Key insights**

The first learning point is that arts and culture appear most credible here not as stand-alone solutions, but as lower-threat routes into difficult issues, dialogue, co-creation, and participation. The second is that longer-term, iterative, locally anchored work seems more plausible than isolated activity as a route to social cohesion-related contribution. The third is that institutions and intermediaries matter: schools, museums, libraries, cultural organisations, and local partners appear repeatedly as carriers of relational and inclusive practice. The fourth is methodological: future MEL needs to capture relational and cumulative change more effectively, using building blocks such as trust, dialogue,

participation, openness, belonging, institutional responsiveness, and network effects rather than expecting all programmes to prove societal cohesion outcomes directly. The fifth is practical: stronger, simpler partner-facing evidence tools are likely to be as important as any central indicator framework.

Taken together, P2P looks like a strong internal case for cautious but meaningful claims about contribution to social cohesion-related building blocks through a cultural relations approach. It is analytically useful not because it proves more than the evidence allows, but because it shows, through examples such as Narva-centred cultural work in Estonia, institutionally embedded dialogic and media-based practice in Lithuania, and broader arts-and-civic portfolios in Latvia, the value of partner-led adaptation, arts as lower-threat engagement, locally anchored relationship-building, and institutional mediation

**Table 1. Summary of Evidence Across Key Dimensions**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Key evidence highlights</b>	<b>Evidence strength</b>
<b>Participation &amp; civic engagement</b>	Active involvement, co-creation, and sustained engagement beyond attendance.	High
<b>Voice &amp; agency</b>	Increased confidence, expression, and ability to contribute, particularly among underrepresented groups.	Moderate to high
<b>Identity &amp; belonging</b>	Stronger connection to place, community, and cultural identity, especially in place-based contexts.	Moderate to high
<b>Dialogue &amp; intergroup relations</b>	Opportunities for exchange across difference; depth varies depending on format.	Moderate
<b>Social connections &amp; networks</b>	Formation of new relationships and networks, including cross-sector and international links.	Moderate
<b>Institutional &amp; systemic change</b>	Some evidence of partnerships and capacity-building, but limited structural change.	Emerging

### **3.4 Where Contribution to Social Cohesion Is More Limited**

While there is clear evidence of contribution in participatory and relational areas, this contribution is less consistent in other contexts and programme formats.

#### **Short-term and one-off formats**

Contribution appears more limited where engagement is short-term or primarily event-based. WOW audience survey data (Pakistan, Istanbul) and programme reporting indicate that while such formats can generate visibility and awareness, there is less consistent evidence that they lead to deeper or sustained relational change. The intensity and duration of interaction appear to be important factors in shaping outcomes, with both evaluation findings and interviews highlighting that one-off engagement is less likely to result in lasting changes in relationships or trust.

#### **Limited participatory design**

Programmes that rely primarily on audience engagement, rather than active participation or co-creation, tend to show weaker evidence of impact. This pattern is reflected across P2P programme evaluations and case study analysis, where stronger outcomes are consistently associated with co-creative formats.

Where participants are not directly involved in shaping activities or content, opportunities for agency, dialogue, and relationship-building are more constrained, as also noted in interviews with programme staff working on P2P and cultural exchange initiatives.

#### **Sustainability of outcomes**

There is limited evidence on whether observed changes – such as increased confidence, new relationships, or shifts in attitudes – are sustained over time. Across P2P reporting, WOW survey data, and Cultural Protection Fund evaluations, data is collected at or shortly after programme delivery, making it difficult to assess longer-term effects. Interviews with British Council staff further highlight gaps in monitoring frameworks, particularly in tracking outcomes beyond the immediate lifecycle of programmes.

#### **Inclusion and reach**

While many programmes aim to be inclusive, participation is not always evenly distributed. Evidence suggests that engagement can remain concentrated among already active or accessible groups, with more limited reach to those facing structural or contextual barriers. This is also reflected in interviews, where practitioners highlight challenges in reaching marginalised or less engaged communities, particularly where programmes rely on existing networks or institutional partners.

### **Institutional and system-level change**

As noted in Section 3.3, evidence of contribution to wider institutional or structural change remains limited. While P2P evaluations and Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth findings indicate some examples of partnership development and organisational learning, there is less clarity on how these translate into longer-term changes in systems, governance, or policy.

Interviews with programme staff further emphasise the difficulty of linking programme-level activity to systemic change, particularly in the absence of longitudinal data and clearly defined pathways.

To sum, these patterns suggest that contribution to social cohesion is closely linked to programme design, duration, and context. Across evaluation findings and interviews, outcomes are most consistently evidenced where engagement is sustained, participatory, and inclusive. Where these conditions are less present, contribution appears more limited or harder to demonstrate.

### **3.5 Unintended Outcomes**

There are also indications of uneven or unintended effects, although evidence remains limited. In some cases, programmes appear to strengthen cohesion within participant groups without necessarily extending across wider communities. There are also signs that participation may remain concentrated among more accessible or already engaged groups. In shorter or less facilitated formats, opportunities for dialogue may not always translate into deeper engagement. These dynamics are not systematically evidenced across the portfolio, but point to the importance of inclusive design, facilitation, and sustained engagement.

## 4. Mechanisms and Pathways to Support Social Cohesion

### 4.1 Cultural Relations as an Enabling Mechanism

The findings in Chapter 3 point consistently to outcomes that are relational in nature – such as participation, dialogue and belonging; and the formation of connections across difference. These are not outcomes that can be delivered directly but rather emerge through the quality of interaction and engagement between participants.

This aligns closely with a cultural relations approach. As outlined above, British Council programmes are typically designed around exchange, co-creation, and partnership, creating conditions in which people engage with one another on terms that are intended to be mutual, respectful, and sustained over time. In this sense, the programme is not only a vehicle for content, but a means of shaping how people come together.

This helps explain why contribution is strongest in areas linked to interaction and shared experience. It also points to a comparative strength of the British Council’s approach, particularly in contexts where building trust, enabling dialogue, and supporting connection across differences are central.

The sections that follow examine more closely how relational processes operate in practice, and the pathways through which they contribute to social cohesion.

### 4.2 Pathways of Change – Patterns Across the Arts Portfolio

Our analysis points to a set of recurring pathways through which British Council arts programmes contribute to social cohesion. These pathways are not linear or uniform, but they appear consistently across different programme types and contexts, based on the evaluation findings, case studies, survey data, and interviews reviewed.

A central feature is the role of **participation and co-creation**. Programmes that involve participants directly – whether through collaborative production, shared decision-making, or joint problem-solving – tend to generate stronger outcomes. Co-creation appears to shift the nature of engagement from passive access to active involvement, creating conditions in which trust, confidence, and mutual recognition can begin to develop.

These processes are often enabled by **shared cultural spaces**, whether physical or temporary. Cultural venues, festivals, and programme environments act as spaces where interaction becomes possible. When designed to be accessible and inclusive, these spaces can support dialogue across difference and provide a setting in which participants feel able to engage openly.

The quality of interaction is also shaped by the nature of **partnerships and programme design**. Approaches that emphasise mutuality, inclusion, and local ownership tend to create more meaningful engagement than top-down or externally driven models. In this context, cultural relations practice – particularly co-creation, partnership-building, and respect for difference – appears to function as an enabling condition rather than a separate outcome.

In several programmes, particularly those focused on heritage or place, **memory and cultural identity** play an important role. Engagement with heritage, storytelling, and shared narratives can support processes of identity repair and belonging, especially in contexts where social or cultural ties have been disrupted.

Finally, the development of **relationships and networks** provides a pathway through which programme effects can extend beyond the immediate activity. New connections – whether social, professional, or institutional – can enable continued interaction, collaboration, and exchange. While these networks are not always systematically tracked, they appear to play a key role in sustaining cohesion-related outcomes over time.

### ***SPOTLIGHT: Gender and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)***

Across the portfolio, **gender equality and wider equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) emerged as important and cross-cutting pathways through which arts programmes contributed to social cohesion.**

While not always framed explicitly as social cohesion objectives at design stage, the available evidence suggests that many programmes helped expand participation, amplify underrepresented voices, enable more equitable forms of dialogue and create spaces where difference could be engaged constructively. In this sense, **EDI is not peripheral to social cohesion outcomes, but one of the principal mechanisms through which those outcomes are generated.**

This is particularly visible where programmes intentionally engaged:

- women and girls
- young people
- marginalised communities
- minority ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups
- displaced or conflict-affected populations
- emerging artists with limited access to platforms
- communities outside major urban centres

## KEY FINDINGS

### A. Gender Equality as a Strong and Visible Entry Point

Gender equality was one of the most consistently evidenced inclusion pathways across the portfolio. Where programmes intentionally centre women's participation and leadership, they often generate broader gains in voice, mutual understanding and civic agency.

### B. Inclusion Through Representation and Cultural Voice

Many programmes demonstrated that who is seen, heard and represented matters for cohesion. Representation is thus not only symbolic; it can be relational and political. Feeling visible within public cultural life can be a precursor to deeper social inclusion.

### C. Safe Spaces for Diverse Dialogue

Inclusive cultural spaces can provide an alternative civic arena in which difficult issues are explored with greater openness, creativity and empathy than is often possible elsewhere.

This is especially relevant in contexts marked by:

- gender inequality
- social fragmentation
- intergenerational divides
- post-conflict tensions
- low trust environments

### D. Reaching Beyond Traditional Elites

Arts programmes can widen inclusion, but inclusion is not automatic; it depends on design choices, partnerships, language, accessibility and resourcing. Without deliberate outreach and inclusive design, arts programmes can risk reproducing existing inequalities in access and participation.

Some evidence suggests programmes were strongest when they moved beyond already-connected urban cultural actors and intentionally broadened participation.

Positive inclusion dynamics were especially associated with efforts to engage:

- grassroots organisations
- regional/rural communities
- young creatives
- first-time participants
- local community groups
- informal cultural actors

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

### 1. Treat EDI as a Core Cohesion Lever

Position gender and inclusion not only as safeguarding or compliance issues, but as central drivers of trust, belonging and equitable participation.

### 2. Focus on Contextual Sensitivity

What constitutes exclusion, identity or marginalisation differs significantly by country and context. Standardised approaches may miss locally salient inequalities.

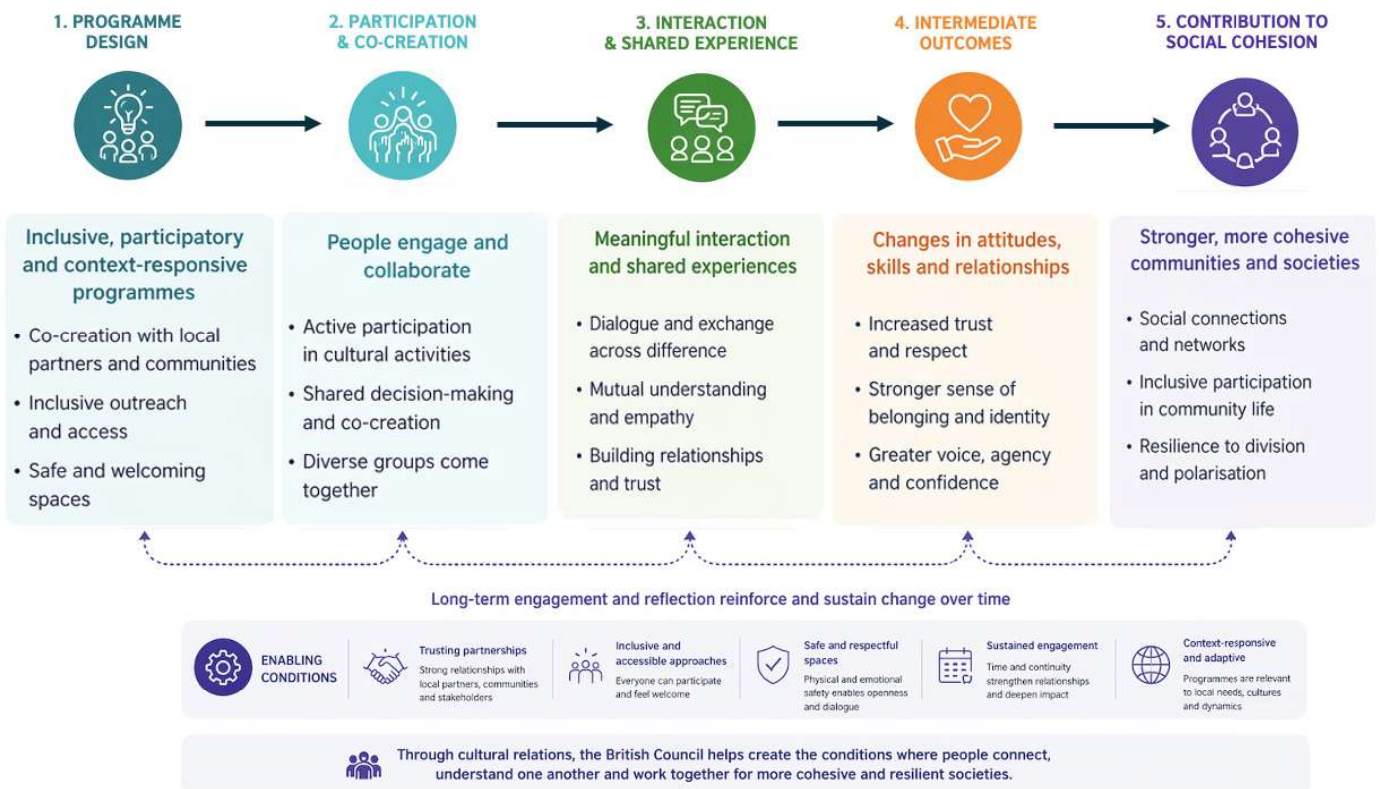
### 3. Design for Inclusion Upfront

Embed inclusion from programme inception through partner selection, participant recruitment, accessible formats, language choices, geographic reach and representation in leadership and content.

### 4. Support Long-Term Pathways

Move beyond one-off visibility moments toward sustained networks, mentorship, leadership and institutional change.

Figure 4.2. Indicative pathways from arts programmes to social cohesion



## ***What Works Most Consistently?***

### **A. Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Encounter Across Difference**

The most consistent finding across the available evidence is the importance of creating spaces (physical, symbolic, or temporary spaces) where people who would not normally meet can interact constructively. These spaces appear to reduce distance, normalise interaction, and create openings for trust and mutual recognition.

### **B. Participation and Co-Creation**

Across all five case studies introduced in this report, participants were not only audiences but contributors, co-creators, volunteers, storytellers, organisers, or decision-makers. This matters because active participation appears more strongly associated with agency, ownership, and sustained engagement than passive consumption.

### **C. Locally Led and Contextually Adapted Delivery**

Programmes and projects were strongest when shaped by local actors, local histories, and local needs rather than imported as fixed models. The case study research highlighted that where local partners acted as trusted intermediaries, they made programmes legitimate, relevant, and accessible. The lesson is thus clear: the transferable element across the British Council's work is not the format itself, but the adaptive process behind it.

### **D. Arts as Lower-Threat Entry Points to Difficult Issues**

The available evidence suggests that arts and culture consistently help make sensitive topics discussable in ways formal civic or political processes often cannot. Storytelling, performance, film, heritage, and collective creativity enable emotionally resonant engagement with issues such as gender inequality, trauma, exclusion, identity and polarisation. This function appears especially strong in politically sensitive or fragile settings.

#### **Strategic Implication:**

The strategic value of arts and culture for social cohesion lies less in standalone events or outputs and more in their function as relational infrastructure: creating safe and inclusive spaces where diverse groups can meet, participate, co-create and build trust over time. Future investment should thus scale principles rather than fixed models, prioritise participation and co-creation, and support longer-term partnerships and repeated engagement, recognising that meaningful social cohesion outcomes emerge cumulatively through relationships rather than through one-off cultural activity.

### 4.3 Enabling Conditions for Social Cohesion

The evidence suggests that outcomes are shaped less by programme type alone and more by how programmes are designed and experienced. A small number of conditions appear to make a consistent difference, although these are not present uniformly across the portfolio.

**Sustained engagement** is one of the clearest factors. Where interaction takes place over time, there is stronger evidence of relational change. Shorter or one-off activities can generate visibility, but are less consistently linked to deeper outcomes.

The **nature of participation** is also critical. Programmes that involve participants in shaping activities tend to generate stronger effects than those based on audience engagement alone, particularly where work is grounded in local context.

The **breadth of participation** further shapes outcomes. Where programmes reach beyond already engaged groups, there is greater potential for connection across difference. In practice, this varies, and participation can remain uneven.

**Format and context also matter.** Smaller-scale, co-creative formats tend to support deeper interaction, while larger-scale activities are more effective at raising awareness. In fragile contexts, the creation of safe and trusted spaces is particularly important.

Across these conditions, **approaches that emphasise mutuality, respect, and openness tend to support stronger outcomes.** Some programmes demonstrate these conditions more consistently than others, helping to explain variation across the British Council portfolio.

## ***What Works Only in Specific Conditions?***

### **A. Large Public Festivals as Drivers of Deeper Change**

Festivals generate visibility, reach, and agenda-setting effects consistently. However, deeper relational or behavioural change appears only when supported by:

- repeat engagement
- targeted follow-up
- inclusive outreach
- pathways into continued action or networks

Without these conditions, festivals are more effective at awareness than transformation.

### **B. Heritage as a Cohesion Tool**

Heritage can be highly effective, but only when communities recognise it as meaningful and have real agency in shaping its use. Where heritage is contested, elite-controlled, overly technical, or disconnected from livelihoods, its cohesion value is weaker.

Heritage works best when it is:

- community-owned
- linked to personal and communal identity and pride
- connected to economic opportunities
- open to reinterpretation by younger generations and contemporary artists

### **C. Institutional Partnerships**

Schools, libraries, museums, cultural centres, and local authorities can scale and sustain cohesion outcomes – but only where they are trusted, open, and willing to collaborate. In low-trust settings, institutions may need mediation through community partners first.

### **D. International Exchange**

Cross-border collaboration can have bridging effects and build mutual understanding, but mainly when exchange moves beyond symbolic networking into genuine co-creation, equal partnership, and sufficient time together. Short or extractive exchange formats are less likely to produce meaningful social cohesion outcomes.

#### **Strategic Implication:**

No single arts and culture modality delivers social cohesion outcomes automatically; effectiveness depends on the enabling conditions around it. A social cohesion strategy should thus focus less on choosing the “right” format and more on designing the conditions – trust ownership, inclusion, continuity, and reciprocity – under which different formats can succeed in different contexts.

## 4.4 Contextual Moderators

The contribution of arts programmes to social cohesion is shaped by context, although evidence on these dynamics remains limited.

In more politically sensitive environments, programme design and delivery are often adapted, including reduced visibility or more cautious forms of engagement. This can influence both the scope of activity and how outcomes are experienced or evidenced.

In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, the creation of safe and trusted spaces becomes particularly important. In these settings, programmes are more likely to focus on rebuilding connections, identity, and dialogue, although the scope for wider or sustained change may be constrained.

Levels of trust in institutions and local capacity also influence how programmes operate. Where trust is low or institutions are less engaged, programmes tend to function as more standalone spaces. Where relationships are stronger, there is more scope for partnership, continuity, and follow-on activity.

Overall, these factors do not determine outcomes, but they shape the conditions under which programmes operate and the extent to which cohesion-related effects can emerge.

### ***What Does Not Travel Well?***

The evidence suggests that some arts and culture approaches are highly transferable when adapted locally, while others lose effectiveness when moved across contexts. What tends to “fail to travel” is thus not culture itself, but programme modalities that depend on specific relationships, histories, trust conditions, or institutional ecosystems that cannot simply be reproduced everywhere.

#### **A. Plug-and-Play Cultural Formats**

Festival models, residencies, heritage labs, or dialogue programmes do not travel well when replicated as fixed formats without redesign for local context. The case study research shows that formats can travel, but only as flexible frameworks, not as ready-made templates.

A successful model in one place may rely on:

- specific local partners
- trusted convenors
- cultural norms around participation

- existing audience behaviour
- political space for expression
- language and identity dynamics

### **B. Standalone Artistic Events as a Cohesion Strategy**

Concerts, festivals, exhibitions, screenings, or performances can create visibility and temporary connection, but their impact is often short-lived without follow-up mechanisms such as:

- facilitated dialogue
- repeat participation
- local partnerships
- pathways into action
- continued networks

The event may travel; the deeper outcome does not automatically travel with it, as trust, belonging, and collaboration appear cumulative and require repetition over time.

### **C. Imported Narratives of Inclusion or Change**

Programmes centred on externally defined themes (e.g. empowerment, resilience, inclusion, identity) may travel poorly when language and framing do not resonate locally.

Arts programmes appear strongest when communities shape the narrative themselves through local storytelling, lived experience, and culturally grounded references. When messages feel imported or overly donor-led, participation and legitimacy can weaken.

### **D. Institution-Led Models Without Trusted Intermediaries**

Partnerships with museums, schools, libraries, theatres, or public authorities can be powerful, but this modality does not travel well into contexts where institutions are mistrusted, inaccessible, politicised, or disconnected from marginalised groups.

In such contexts, community organisations, artists, informal networks, or hybrid partnerships may be more effective entry points than formal institutions alone.

### **E. High-Intensity Exchange Models Requiring Significant Resources**

Residencies, international exchanges, and co-production labs can produce strong relational outcomes, but they often depend on substantial funding, travel mobility, participant time commitment, language capacity, visas and permissions and strong delivery partners

This means they may not travel easily into lower-resource settings or at larger scale unless redesigned into lighter or blended models.

#### **F. Heritage Programmes Detached from Living Communities**

Built heritage restoration or heritage programming does not travel well when focused mainly on assets rather than people. Restoring a site alone does not guarantee social cohesion.

What appears transferable is community stewardship, shared memory, participation, and contemporary use – not restoration as a technical exercise in itself.

#### **Strategic Implication:**

Arts and culture modalities do not travel best as products – they travel best as principles. Arts and culture programmes should thus be scaled through adaptation, not replication. What scales across contexts is not “run this festival” or “replicate this residency,” but:

- co-creation
- local ownership
- safe spaces
- culturally relevant storytelling
- trusted partnerships
- repeat engagement
- adaptive delivery

Future strategy should therefore prioritise context-sensitive design, local partners, community-led narratives, follow-up beyond one-off events, and lighter or hybrid delivery models where resources are limited.

## 5. Strategic Considerations

### 5.1 Overall Strategic Considerations

The evaluation demonstrates how the British Council's arts and cultural heritage work already makes a credible contribution to social cohesion in a number of areas, but that this contribution is often stronger in practice than in how it is currently framed, measured and communicated. The strategic recommendations below therefore focus not on creating an entirely new direction of travel, but on strengthening the clarity, intentionality and policy relevance of work that is already emerging across the portfolio. They are designed to complement the programme design and MEL recommendations which follow, and to align with the strengthened evidence framework proposed in Chapter 6. They should also be read alongside key learning points and reflections presented throughout this report.

#### **1. Position social cohesion more explicitly within the British Council's cultural relations offer**

The report illustrates how social cohesion outcomes are not peripheral to the British Council's arts and cultural heritage work, but closely connected to its distinctive role as a cultural relations actor that builds trust, enables dialogue, supports participation and fosters connection across difference. The British Council should therefore articulate more clearly, internally and externally, how social cohesion relates to its cultural relations mission, particularly in contexts shaped by fragility, polarisation, inequality or weakened trust. This does not require a narrow or instrumental framing of all arts work. Rather, it requires greater confidence and clarity in explaining how arts and cultural heritage programmes can contribute to the relational foundations of more inclusive and resilient societies.

#### **2. Move from implicit to more intentional design for social cohesion relevant outcomes**

Across the British Council portfolio, many programmes appear to support social cohesion-related outcomes, but often as implicit or secondary effects rather than as clearly articulated design considerations. The British Council should therefore encourage programme teams to identify, at an appropriate and proportionate level, which social cohesion relevant outcomes are most plausible for a given intervention, and how programme design is expected to support them. This should not mean imposing a rigid social cohesion frame on all programmes. It means making pathways of contribution more visible from the outset, especially where programmes aim to support dialogue, trust building, inclusion, agency, network building or institutional relationship development. A more intentional design approach would strengthen both programme coherence and later evidence generation.

### **3. Adopt a shared but flexible cross-portfolio framework for social cohesion evidence**

The evaluation has found that the current evidence base is fragmented and uneven, even where promising work is taking place. British Council should therefore adopt a more consistent and modular approach to social cohesion evidence across the arts portfolio, using a shared menu of social cohesion ingredients and a practical evidence architecture that can be adapted to different contexts and programme types. The aim should not be full standardisation. Rather, it should be to create enough common structure to support comparability, strategic learning and clearer articulation of contribution, while retaining the flexibility needed for diverse geographies, modalities and local realities. The strengthened evidence framework and companion toolkit proposed in this report are intended to support this shift.

### **4. Strengthen British Council’s policy and thought leadership on arts, culture and social cohesion**

The British Council is well placed to play a stronger leadership role in international (and national) debates on arts, culture and social cohesion, particularly if it can combine its cultural relations positioning with a more credible and better articulated evidence base. This could include more confident use of evaluation findings, stronger positioning in ODA and international development discussions, and greater visibility for the distinctive contribution that arts and cultural heritage can make to trust, participation, dialogue and relationship-building. Such leadership should be grounded in methodological discipline and cautious contribution claims, not inflated impact rhetoric. If strengthened in this way, the British Council could help shape the field more effectively, both as a practitioner and as a source of learning on how cultural relations work contributes to social cohesion in complex settings.

## **5.2 Programme Design Considerations**

As highlighted throughout this report, evidence from across the British Council’s arts portfolio indicates that programmes are contributing to social cohesion in meaningful but uneven ways. Strongest outcomes are observed where programmes enable interaction across difference, foster dialogue and reflection, and support the development of ongoing relationships and networks. However, these outcomes are often implicit rather than intentionally designed, limiting both their consistency and the ability to evidence them.

The following **considerations outline how programme design can more systematically enable contributions to social cohesion**. They are grounded in a **contribution-based logic**, recognising that arts programmes do not directly “produce” social cohesion, but create conditions through which it can emerge – notably through trust-building, mutual understanding, and bridging social capital.

### *1. From Implicit to Intentional Design*

A key finding across the portfolio is that social cohesion outcomes are frequently treated as implicit by-products of arts and cultural relations programming rather than as explicit design objectives. Strengthening programme design therefore begins with intentionality. This involves clearly articulating how programme activities are expected to contribute to outcomes such as trust, belonging, dialogue, and collaboration.

In practice, this can be achieved through light-touch Theories of Change, which map how artistic activities lead to meaningful interaction and, in turn, to social cohesion outcomes. This helps move programmes towards a clearer emphasis on mechanisms that drive change.

### *2. Designing for Interaction and Exchange*

This evaluation consistently shows that participation alone is insufficient. Social cohesion outcomes depend on the quality and structure of interaction between participants.

Programmes that are most effective tend to prioritise process-based engagement over one-off events. This includes co-creation, facilitated dialogue, and shared problem-solving, where participants actively engage with one another over time. In these contexts, arts and creative expressions function as a platform for interaction, not only as a product.

A critical enabling factor is also skilled facilitation, which supports constructive engagement across difference, manages tensions, and creates psychologically safe environments. Without this, there is a risk that diversity remains superficial or that existing divides are reinforced.

### *3. Treating EDI as a Core Mechanism for Contributing to Social Cohesion*

The evaluation findings suggest that future programming would benefit from treating gender equality and EDI not as an add-on or compliance issue, but as a **core mechanism for contributing to social cohesion**. Embedding inclusive design, broadening participation, and strengthening evidence on who benefits and how would significantly enhance both programme effectiveness and strategic learning.

### *4. Engaging with Difference: From Diversity to Bridging*

While many programmes successfully bring together diverse participants, fewer are explicitly designed to foster bridging across difference – connections across meaningful social divides. Yet this is central to social cohesion.

Effective programme design therefore requires intentional strategies to ensure that diversity translates into meaningful exchange and collaboration. Co-creation processes are particularly effective, as they require participants to work towards shared outcomes and negotiate perspectives.

At the same time, programmes must address power dynamics and barriers to participation. Ensuring equitable participation – through inclusive facilitation, accessibility measures, and context-sensitive design – is essential to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

#### *5. Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces*

Arts and culture programmes can provide unique opportunities for identity expression and dialogue, but this depends on the creation of safe and inclusive spaces. Psychological safety is a precondition for meaningful engagement, particularly in contexts marked by tension or inequality.

This requires careful attention to facilitation, clear norms for engagement, and sensitivity to local dynamics. Working with trusted local partners is critical in this context, as they bring credibility and nuanced understanding of local dynamics. Furthermore, enabling multiple forms of expression can broaden participation and deepen engagement.

#### *6. Sustaining Relationships and Networks*

A key limitation identified across programmes is the short-term nature of some of the programme activities. While one-off interventions can shift perceptions, sustained social cohesion outcomes require ongoing interaction and relationship-building.

Programmes that generate more durable effects tend to incorporate elements of continuity, such as multi-phase engagement, alumni networks, or follow-on collaboration opportunities. In these cases, the programme acts as a catalyst for longer-term relationships, rather than a standalone activity.

Strengthening this dimension also contributes to building local cultural ecosystems and networks, which are essential for sustaining social cohesion over time.

#### *7. Embedding Reflection and Adaptive Learning*

Social cohesion outcomes are emergent and context-dependent, requiring programmes to be adaptive. Embedding reflection and learning loops into programme design is therefore critical. Structured reflection – for example, through participant discussions, facilitator debriefs, or storytelling – serves both as a learning mechanism and as a driver of social cohesion outcomes, particularly outcomes such as empathy and mutual understanding.

From a programme design perspective, incorporating light-touch feedback mechanisms enables programmes to adapt in real time and respond to evolving dynamics, strengthening both effectiveness and evidence.

#### 8. *Context Sensitivity as a Core Principle*

Finally, effective programme design must avoid standardised approaches and be context sensitive to ensure relevance and avoid unintended negative effects. Social cohesion challenges vary significantly across settings, shaped by local histories, power dynamics, and political and socio-economic conditions.

Programmes should therefore be informed by basic context analysis, identifying key divides, risks, and opportunities for engagement. This enables adaptation of programme formats across diverse geographies, participant selection, and facilitation approaches to local realities.

#### ***Concluding Reflection***

In summary, strengthening the British Council's arts programmes' contribution to social cohesion through its cultural relations approach requires a shift from participation to interaction, from diversity to bridging, and from one-off engagement to sustained processes.

The British Council's comparative advantage lies in its ability to convene diverse actors through arts and culture over longer periods of time. Maximising this potential depends on designing programmes that translate these encounters into meaningful, sustained interaction processes that build trust, foster understanding, and strengthen long-term relationships.

By embedding social cohesion more explicitly within programme design – while maintaining flexibility and context sensitivity – the British Council can enhance both the depth and durability of its impact, as well as its ability to evidence its contribution within a broader cultural relations framework.

### **5.3 MEL & Evidence Considerations**

This evaluation has found that British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes show meaningful contribution to social cohesion in a number of areas, but that the **current evidence base remains uneven, fragmented and often stronger on visible outputs than on the relational and processual pathways** through which contribution takes place. Furthermore, there is often **a lack of baseline discipline, limited institutional-level indicators on social cohesion and significant gaps in capturing unintended outcomes and differential impacts**, for example, on youth / women / minority groups or in terms of fragile versus stable contexts.

A strengthened evidence framework is therefore needed, not as a new stand-alone MEL system, but as a practical way of improving how British Council identifies, captures and interprets evidence of contribution across a diverse portfolio of work. This framework is described in more detail in Chapter 6, building on the following **key recommendations**:

- Build on existing MEL tools and theories of change
- Selectively adapt Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner's Value Creation Framework, as it supports capturing the nuanced and dynamic ways in which value is created within social learning spaces over time
- Identify practical 'ingredients' or building blocks of social cohesion that can be evidenced credibly and that enable a more consistent language across programmes and geographies when discussing social cohesion outcomes
- Articulate programme objectives and outcomes more clearly from the start of a programme
- Follow a layered data collection architecture that combines different types of evidence for different purposes and embed it as a modular system (i.e. a coherent but flexible structure)
- Systematically capture baselines, unintentional outcomes and differential impacts
- Develop stronger and clearer feedback loops as a core MEL function through which existing evidence can inform future action
- Maintain proportionality and context sensitivity.

## 6. Towards a Strengthened Evidence Framework

The framework proposed here is designed to complement existing MEL tools and theories of change, while strengthening the British Council's ability to evidence how arts and cultural heritage programmes may contribute to social cohesion through relational, context-dependent and often indirect pathways. It draws selectively on the Value Creation Framework developed by Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (as described in their 2020 book *Learning to Make a Difference: Value Creation in Social Learning Spaces*), particularly its distinction between effect data and contribution data and its attention to how value is generated and carried forward over time.

### 6.1 Value Creation Framework

A strengthened evidence framework needs to do more than add new indicators. It needs to improve the British Council's ability to understand and evidence how arts and cultural heritage programmes may contribute to social cohesion through pathways that are often relational, indirect, iterative and context dependent. This is why this report proposes a **selective adaptation** of Etienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner's Value Creation Framework, rather than a wholly new stand-alone model. The Value Creation Framework is a useful complement to theory of change and existing MEL tools, particularly because it **helps capture the nuanced and dynamic ways in which value is created within social learning spaces over time**.

The case for using this framework is not that British Council programmes are identical to the kinds of social learning spaces described in *Learning to Make a Difference*. They are not. British Council arts and cultural heritage interventions are more heterogeneous, ranging from exchanges and peer-learning cohorts to grant programmes, festivals, community heritage work and broader programme architectures. For that reason, the Value Creation Framework is most useful here as a lens and source of tools, less as a master model to be applied in full across the whole portfolio. The strengthened evidence framework is therefore best understood as a practical way of strengthening attention to the kinds of values that British Council work may plausibly create, especially where existing MEL is weaker on process, relational dynamics, indirect contribution and participant-experienced pathways of change.

The most important contribution of the Value Creation Framework for this framework is its **distinction between effect data and contribution data**. Effect data establishes that something of value was achieved at a given point or cycle. Contribution data establishes a plausible account of how the social learning space, or in this case the arts or cultural relations intervention, contributed to that effect. In the value creation approach it is clear that these two forms of data are complementary: effect data alone is insufficient to understand the value being created, while contribution data alone risks relying too

heavily on one person's account or perspective. Used together, however, they provide a more robust picture. This distinction is highly relevant to this evaluation, where the evidence base is often stronger on visible activities, outputs or isolated perception signals than on the pathways through which trust, dialogue, participation, relationships or institutional change may have developed.

A second reason the Value Creation Framework is helpful is that it **offers a language for tracing how value is generated and carried forward over time**. The theory describes eight value-creation cycles, but it also cautions that these should not be treated as rigid phases or used mechanically in every situation. Multiple cycles may be intertwined in any one activity, and some cycles are likely to be more salient to some actors than to others. In practice, the distinctions are useful for being more intentional about what kinds of value to look for and how social learning may make a difference. For British Council purposes, our earlier analysis suggests that the most operationally useful focus is likely to fall on the four inner cycles – immediate potential, applied and realised value – with enabling and strategic value being especially relevant for partnership and institutional settings. By contrast, orienting and transformative value may be useful as sensitising concepts, but are less likely to be evidenced consistently across programmes and carry a higher risk of overclaiming.

This points to the need for selective adaptation rather than full transfer. The most operationalisable output for this present context is a lighter modular version of the Value Creation Framework that can complement existing British Council systems. One useful move is to **translate the logic of value creation into a structured set of social cohesion-relevant ingredients and pathways**, while allowing programmes to work with a reduced frame and only bring in wider value cycles where appropriate. Another is to preserve the distinction between effect data and contribution data by asking, for each indicator area, both “what evidence is there that something changed?” and “what is the plausible account of how the intervention contributed?” This is one of the cleanest ways of strengthening evidence quality without pretending to resolve causality in settings where such control is neither feasible nor desirable.

The role of **value creation stories** is particularly important here. In *Learning to Make a Difference*, the Wenger-Trayners treat these as a specific form of contribution data: grounded accounts that help make plausible links between an activity and an effect, while still acknowledging uncertainty and the role of other factors. This is especially useful for arts, cultural relations and social cohesion work, where significant effects may lie in trust building, recognition, weak ties, repeated participation, partnership development or changed ways of working, rather than in one immediately measurable end result. At the same time, the value creation approach also warns that stories alone are not enough, that they can be partial or distorted, and that they are strongest when integrated with other forms of data. That is why the framework proposed here treats value creation stories not as a replacement for existing change stories or indicators, but as one component in a broader evidence architecture.

This is also where the framework aligns well with what was promised to the British Council as part of this evaluation. The evaluation committed not only to a mixed-method approach, but to practical and actionable tools, context-appropriate indicators, step-by-step guidance, illustrative examples, and learning loops that would strengthen evidence without imposing one heavy model across a diverse portfolio. The strengthened evidence framework, which draws selectively on the Value Creation Framework, is therefore not an attempt to create a parallel universe of concepts. It is a way of making the British Council's existing evidence approach more capable of recognising and tracing forms of value that are currently harder to capture, especially those linked to process, relationships, delayed uptake and institutional or partnership effects.

In summary, the selective adaptation of the Value Creation Framework is proposed here for three main reasons:

- **First**, it helps move the evidence conversation beyond a narrow search for explicit 'social cohesion indicators' towards a more credible account of the ingredients and pathways through which contribution may occur
- **Second**, it provides a practical way of integrating effect data and contribution data, rather than relying on either alone
- **Third**, it supports a more learning-oriented and participant-aware approach to evidence, while remaining compatible with British Council's existing MEL tools and reporting requirements.

For these reasons, it provides a strong conceptual home for the strengthened evidence framework proposed in this report, provided it is used selectively, in plain language, and in combination with the indicator menu, data collection tools and learning loops set out below.

## 6.2 Data Collection Architecture

If the value creation perspective adopted in this report provides the conceptual home for a strengthened evidence framework, the next question is how this can operate in practice across a diverse British Council portfolio. The answer is not a single new instrument, but **a layered data collection architecture that combines different types of evidence for different purposes**. This is important because the evaluation has found, as detailed above, that the existing evidence base is often uneven, with fragmented records, weak baselines, limited institutional-level indicators, and inconsistent articulation of pathways. A strengthened framework therefore needs to improve not only what is collected, but how different forms of evidence are combined and interpreted.

The architecture proposed here follows the evaluation's original commitment to develop a practical toolkit of indicators and data collection tools, aligned with British Council MEL, adaptable across contexts, and supported by basic analysis templates, reporting guidance and illustrative examples. The intention is not to create a parallel system, but to offer a modular structure that can be used alongside existing programme monitoring,

evaluation and reporting tools. This is especially important given the breadth of the portfolio and the likelihood that some relevant evidence is already captured in different ways across teams, partners and programmes.

At the centre of this architecture is a simple but important distinction drawn from *Learning to Make a Difference*: the difference between effect data and contribution data, mentioned above. Effect data helps establish that something happened, for example a reported increase in confidence to engage across difference, evidence of repeat participation, or a stronger and more active partnership. Contribution data helps explain how the programme may plausibly have contributed to that change, for example through a value creation story, partner reflection, or a structured account of what was taken forward after an activity. A stronger evidence base is built when these forms of data are brought together, rather than when either one is relied on in isolation.

In practical terms, the proposed architecture has five main components:

### *1. Light-touch perception and reflection prompts*

These provide a practical way of generating effect data on participant experience, understanding, connection, confidence and follow-through. The toolkit question bank is deliberately designed as a small and adaptable prompt menu rather than a fixed standard survey and is intended to complement existing British Council question practice rather than duplicate it. This is likely to be most useful where programmes need a proportionate way of gathering signals on trust, dialogue, participation, connection across difference or early indications of future action.

### *2. Partnership and participation tracking*

This component captures relational and process evidence that may not be fully visible in survey or reflection data. It can help record who took part, who was missing, what kinds of interaction took place, whether participation widened or deepened, and whether any new connections, follow-up actions or stronger partnerships emerged. This is especially relevant where British Council contribution may be visible not only in participant perceptions, but also in network effects, convening roles, partnership quality and the conditions that enable interaction across difference.

### *3. Value creation stories*

These provide contribution data that helps show how something experienced as valuable was carried forward into later action, practice, relationships or other effects. In contrast to more conventional reporting stories, the value creation story prompt proposed in the toolkit is designed to trace a plausible flow of value from a specific moment or interaction into what followed afterwards. This makes it particularly useful where programme effects are indirect, relational or delayed, and where standard indicators alone are unlikely to capture the pathway of contribution. Used selectively, value creation stories

can add depth and explanatory power to the evidence base without replacing other forms of data.

#### *4. Triangulation and interpretation*

A strengthened architecture also needs a step that helps users judge what the available evidence does and does not support. The toolkit therefore includes a light-touch triangulation and interpretation prompt, designed to help teams look across survey signals, tracking data, stories, observations, partner reflections and existing documentation before drawing a conclusion. This matters because in social cohesion-related work, evidence is often mixed, partial and context-specific. A short interpretive pause can help distinguish between findings that are reasonably well-supported, those that are still emerging, and those where important voices or evidence sources remain missing. This is consistent with the evaluation's wider emphasis on strengthening evidence quality without creating false precision.

#### *5. Evidence-strength assessment*

Finally, where findings become important for case studies, reporting, strategic learning or cross-portfolio comparison, the evidence rating matrix provides a more structured way of judging strength, consistency, caveats and remaining gaps. This is the most formal component of the architecture and is intended to help the British Council move beyond the simple accumulation of evidence towards clearer judgements about confidence, transferability and limitations. In this sense, the matrix is not a first-step collection tool, but a review tool that helps bring together what has been gathered through the other components.

The value of this architecture lies not only in the individual tools, but in how they work together. Light-touch prompts can provide early signals. Participation and partnership tracking can show relational and process patterns. Value creation stories can make pathways of contribution more visible. Triangulation can help teams interpret what the combined evidence suggests. The evidence rating matrix can then support a fuller judgement where needed. This is the logic that underpins the separate toolkit, and it is also the reason why the framework proposed here should be understood as an architecture rather than a single measurement device.

This architecture also reflects a practical judgement about proportionality. Not every programme needs every component, and not every activity needs a formal evidence process. Some programmes may only need a short set of prompts and a brief participation note. Others, especially those involving repeated engagement, multiple partners, or more significant strategic learning questions, may benefit from combining several tools. This modularity is not a weakness. It is one of the conditions for making the framework usable across different geographies, modalities and resource levels, while remaining aligned with the British Council's existing MEL approach and this evaluation's promise of a practical and adaptable toolkit.

In this sense, the proposed data collection architecture is the operational expression of the strengthened evidence framework. It translates the conceptual logic of value creation into a set of complementary evidence functions and provides the bridge between the report's recommendations and the toolkit's practical tools. Next, we show the main indicator areas that this architecture is intended to capture.

### 6.3 Proposed Indicator Menu

The strengthened evidence framework proposed in this report does not seek to reduce social cohesion to a single metric. Instead, it works with a manageable menu of indicator areas that reflect the most plausible ways in which the British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes may contribute to social cohesion across different contexts. The aim of this approach is to **identify practical 'ingredients' or building blocks of social cohesion that can be evidenced credibly**, rather than to force an over-extended master framework onto a diverse portfolio.

This matters for two reasons. First, social cohesion is conceptually broad and contested, and few British Council arts programmes currently use it as a direct formal indicator. Second, the evaluation has found that British Council contribution is most plausibly visible in the relational and attitudinal dimensions of cohesion, namely how individuals and groups interact, how they perceive one another, how they participate in shared social and cultural life, and how partnerships and processes create conditions for these shifts. Structural drivers such as inequality, governance or conflict dynamics remain important, but they are treated here primarily as contextual conditions rather than direct programme outputs.

The proposed indicator menu therefore organises the evidence framework around seven headline areas:

#### *1. Trust and safety*

This area captures whether programmes appear to create conditions in which people feel safe to engage, more willing to cooperate, less suspicious of others, or more trusting of convenors, facilitators or partner institutions. Trust may be interpersonal, intergroup or institutional, and may remain partial, fragile or uneven. It is included because both the proxy work and the wider literature reviewed for this consultancy suggest that trust is central to how societies "hold together," and because the evaluation has repeatedly found it to be one of the most plausible contribution areas for arts and cultural relations interventions.

#### *2. Dialogue and mutual recognition*

This area captures openness to different perspectives, respectful exchange, empathy, reduced stereotyping, perceived fairness in process, and the quality of encounters across difference. In practice, this may be visible through how participants describe

listening, recognition, disagreement, or exposure to others' experiences. It is included because social cohesion-relevant change often depends not only on contact, but on the quality of interaction and the extent to which people feel heard and recognised.

### *3. Belonging and participation*

This area covers sense of inclusion, confidence to take part, agency or voice, repeat participation, bringing others into the process, and access to shared social and cultural space. It is important because many relevant effects of arts programmes may appear not as dramatic attitudinal change, but as greater comfort, visibility, confidence or willingness to participate in collective life. It also provides a bridge between individual experience and wider social participation.

### *4. Connections across difference*

This area captures bridging relationships, new collaborations, weak ties, greater familiarity across groups, and signs of cooperation across social, political, ethnic, religious or other lines of difference. It is especially important because, as the proxy work emphasises, programmes may strengthen bonding within a group without necessarily producing bridging effects, and strong internal cohesion can sometimes coexist with exclusion of others. This indicator area therefore helps keep attention on whether programmes are widening connections beyond existing circles.

### *5. Institutional and partnership conditions*

This area focuses on the quality and diversity of partnerships, inclusive governance practices, trust in institutions, the durability of relationships beyond a single activity, and evidence that learning is being embedded into programme design or MEL. It is included because this evaluation explicitly committed to addressing institutional and system-level contribution, and because the evaluation's key findings suggest that some of the British Council's most distinctive contribution may lie in convening, partnership-building and longer-term institutional effects, not only in direct participant experience.

### *6. Process and enabling conditions*

This area captures features such as facilitation quality, safe-space design, dosage or continuity, accessibility of cultural space, co-creation, cultural sensitivity and other aspects of programme design and delivery that appear to support or constrain outcomes. These are included because the evidence reviewed so far suggests they are often not secondary operational details, but core conditions shaping whether trust, dialogue, participation or relationship-building emerge at all. In other words, they help explain not only whether change is visible, but why it may or may not have occurred.

## 7. Risks and unintended effects

Finally, the menu includes explicit attention to risks such as bonding without bridging, negative or poorly supported contact across groups, tokenism, backlash, perceptions of unfairness, exclusion of some groups, or participation patterns that reproduce rather than reduce divides. This is important both for analytical credibility and for practical use.

**A strengthened evidence framework should not only look for positive contribution, but also create space to recognise mixed, uneven or adverse dynamics** where they arise.

Taken together, these areas form a headline overview rather than a detailed coding frame. They are intended to be usable across programmes and geographies, while remaining sufficiently grounded in the proxy work and broader conceptual framing developed during this consultancy. In this sense, they sit between two levels of detail: they are more practical than the full proxy list, but more analytically structured than a loose collection of indicators. This makes them suitable for use both in the report's strengthened evidence framework and in the toolkit's shorter front-end indicator menu.

The menu should also be read across multiple levels of analysis. Some indicators are most visible at individual level, such as confidence, trust or willingness to participate. Others emerge more clearly at community, network, institutional or process level, such as collaboration across groups, durable partnerships, governance practices or enabling conditions. This multi-level framing is important because the British Council's contribution to social cohesion may be visible not only in what participants feel, but also in how relationships, partnerships, spaces and practices develop around them.

For these reasons, the proposed indicator menu should be treated as a selection aid, not a requirement to capture every area in every programme. Its main value is to guide attention towards the most plausible and evidencable areas of contribution, while allowing teams to choose the combination of indicators and tools that best fits programme type, scale and context. The toolkit then operationalises this menu through a set of light-touch tools and prompts, while the learning and feedback loops proposed below show how the resulting evidence can be used over time.

### 6.4 Learning and Feedback Loops

A strengthened evidence framework will only add value if it supports learning as well as reporting. One of the clearest findings from this evaluation is that the British Council already generates relevant evidence across programmes, partners and surveys, but that this evidence is often fragmented, unevenly structured, and not always fed back systematically into programme design, partnership practice or cross-portfolio learning. **A stronger framework therefore needs not only better tools, but also clearer feedback loops through which evidence can inform future action.**

This is one of the points at which the Value Creation Framework is particularly useful. Value creation is not only about identifying outcomes after the event. It is also about tracing how what is learned, noticed or experienced in one moment may be carried forward into later decisions, relationships, practices or institutional shifts. In other words, a stronger evidence approach should help the British Council become more intentional not only about capturing value, but also about using that knowledge. This is especially relevant in arts and social cohesion work, where meaningful contribution may emerge gradually through repetition, trust-building, partnership development and local adaptation rather than through one-off measurable shifts.

At a practical level, the proposed framework suggests four main types of learning and feedback loop:

### *1. Activity-to-programme feedback*

Evidence gathered through light-touch prompts, participation tracking, partner reflection and value creation stories should be used to inform the next stage of delivery, not only final reporting. This may include adapting facilitation, revising participant outreach, addressing inclusion gaps, strengthening partnership roles, or adjusting follow-up activity. In this sense, evidence becomes part of programme stewardship rather than something collected only retrospectively.

### *2. Programme-to-partnership feedback*

Some of the most important evidence gathered as part of this evaluation sits not only at participant level, but at the level of partner relationships, convening roles and institutional practices. Learning loops should therefore include structured reflection with partners on what seems to be enabling trust, dialogue, participation or collaboration, what barriers remain, and where partnership design could improve. This is particularly important where British Council's contribution lies partly in creating the conditions for others to connect, collaborate or continue working together over time.

### *3. Programme-to-portfolio feedback*

A strengthened framework should also allow patterns to be compared across programmes, without forcing artificial standardisation. This is where the indicator menu, triangulation prompt and evidence rating matrix become especially useful. Together they can help identify which contribution areas recur most often, where the evidence base is strongest or weakest, which process conditions appear to matter repeatedly, and what kinds of gaps persist across the portfolio. This creates the basis for more strategic learning than isolated project-by-project reporting allows.

#### 4. Evidence-to-MEL feedback

Finally, the framework should support reflection on British Council's MEL practice itself. This includes asking which questions are already working well, where current survey and reporting systems already capture relevant ingredients, where evidence is repeatedly thin or missing, and what modest adjustments could improve future data quality. In this sense, learning loops are not only about programme improvement, but also about gradually strengthening the organisation's own evidence architecture over time.

These **loops matter because they shift the role of evidence from static accumulation to iterative use**. A question bank becomes more valuable if the responses help refine future engagement. A value creation story becomes more useful if it informs how future activities are designed or followed up. Participation and partnership tracking become more meaningful if they help teams notice recurring exclusions, repeated absences, or promising forms of connection that can be supported further. This is where the strengthened framework begins to align not only with MEL, but also with a more social learning-oriented understanding of practice.

At the same time, these **feedback loops should remain proportionate**. The aim is not to create a heavy review burden or a new reporting layer for every activity. In many cases, the relevant loop may be very simple: a short internal reflection after an event, a partner conversation at the end of a cycle, a periodic review of stories and evidence signals, or a light portfolio-level synthesis at agreed intervals. What matters is that evidence is not left unused, and that the framework creates modest but regular opportunities for interpretation, adaptation and shared learning.

For these reasons, **learning and feedback loops should be treated as a core part of the strengthened evidence framework**, not as an optional add-on. They are what make the framework useful in practice. The separate toolkit operationalises this through tools that can support reflection, triangulation and evidence-strength judgement. The overall intention is not only to improve the British Council's ability to evidence contribution to social cohesion, but also to support more thoughtful programme development, partnership practice and cross-portfolio learning over time.

## 7. Conclusions

This evaluation finds that the British Council's arts and cultural heritage programmes make a **credible and strategically significant contribution to social cohesion**, particularly in relational domains such as participation, dialogue, belonging and network-building.

Across a diverse global portfolio, British Council arts and cultural heritage programmes in particular contribute to the *conditions* under which social cohesion can emerge and be fostered, rather than directly producing measurable cohesion outcomes at scale. This contribution is most visible at the individual and community levels, and increasingly, though more unevenly, at institutional and systemic levels through partnerships and system-enabling effects.

### Where the evidence is strongest

The strongest and most consistent evidence relates to:

- *Voice, agency and participation*: Active engagement, co-creation and increased confidence to contribute and act for social change
- *Belonging, recognition and inclusion*: Reinforced identity, recognition and connection to a community
- *Dialogue and mutual understanding*: Meaningful exchanges across diverse perspectives and lived experiences
- *Networks, bridging and collaboration*: Formation of new relationships and cross-sector partnerships.

These outcomes are most evident in programmes that are **participatory, sustained, and grounded in cultural relations principles**, particularly in principles such as co-creation, mutuality and local ownership.

Across the portfolio, **gender equality and wider equality, diversity and inclusion emerged as important pathways through which arts programmes contributed to social cohesion**. The strongest evidence came from initiatives that intentionally expanded voice, representation and participation for underrepresented groups, particularly women and young people. While these outcomes were not always systematically measured, the findings suggest that inclusive cultural participation can strengthen belonging, dialogue, confidence and trust. Future programming would benefit from **treating EDI not as an add-on, but as a central mechanism for achieving cohesive and resilient societies**.

### Where caution is required

However, this evaluation also highlights important limitations:

- *Weaker evidence on trust (especially institutional trust)* and long-term attitudinal change
- *Limited baselines and longitudinal data*, making it difficult to assess the full extent and sustainability of outcomes
- *Fragmented and inconsistent MEL practices*, with reliance on self-reported and short-term data
- *Uneven reach and inclusion*, with some programmes engaging already-connected groups
- *Limited evidence of system-level change*, despite promising partnership effects (including at policymaking levels) and anecdotal impact on public discourse.

These gaps do not negate the contributions identified as a result of this evaluation, but underline the need for more disciplined, coherent and longitudinal evidence generation.

### Strategic significance for the British Council

In summary, this evaluation highlights that arts and cultural relations do not “solve” social cohesion challenges, but that they play a distinct, enabling and often important role in shaping the relational foundations of more inclusive, resilient and connected societies.

This reinforces the conclusion that social cohesion is not peripheral but **central to the British Council’s cultural relations mandate**. Its distinctive value thus lies not only in delivering arts programmes, but in:

- Convening across perceived boundaries and differences and enabling dialogue
- Building long-term, trust-based relationships
- Supporting social learning and co-creation across diverse contexts
- Acting as an enabling and infrastructural actor within cultural and social ecosystems.

In a global context marked by declining trust, polarisation and social fragmentation, this positioning is both highly relevant and strategically differentiating.

## Forward-looking positioning

To fully realise this potential, the British Council will need to:

- *Move from implicit to intentional design for social cohesion outcomes*
- *Focus on relational “ingredients” of cohesion, rather than over-claiming structural impact*
- *Prioritise sustained, inclusive and context-sensitive engagement models*
- *Focus on adaptable principles and programme design approaches rather than fixed programme models*
- *Strengthen its evidence architecture, combining effect and contribution data*
- *Embed learning and adaptive feedback loops across programmes.*

In doing so, the British Council can position itself as a **global leader in evidencing and advancing the role of arts and cultural relations in social cohesion**, strengthening both its policy relevance and its impact within sustainable development, global security and cultural relations frameworks.

## Annex – Literature & Desk Review

This annex reproduces, in adapted form, the fuller literature and desk review undertaken during the inception phase of the evaluation. It is included here as a supporting reference for readers who want more detail on the conceptual and evidence base informing the report’s analytical framework.

### Headline Summary of Initial Desk Research

The desk research reviewed a wide body of British Council programme evidence, global practice reports, and cross-national studies on the role of arts, culture and heritage in strengthening social cohesion, particularly in fragile, post-conflict and diverse settings. The materials analysed include British Council evaluations (2016–2024), UNESCO guidance on intercultural dialogue and cultural rights (UNESCO 2010; UNESCO 2022), OECD fragility and resilience frameworks (OECD 2020; OECD 2025), EUNIC guidance for cultural relations in fragile contexts (EUNIC 2021), and practitioner evidence from a range of different countries such as Colombia, Palestine, Rwanda, Vietnam, Syria and Ukraine.

This review identifies common mechanisms, enabling conditions and risks associated with arts- and culture-led approaches, and provides a practical grounding for the conceptual literature reviewed in the following section. It also highlights the types of cohesion outcomes that are most plausible for cultural relations programming to influence.

#### What desk research shows about social cohesion in practice

Across British Council and partner programme documents (e.g., British Council 2019; BC/UWS 2018), social cohesion is consistently treated as a relational and attitudinal phenomenon, shaped by how individuals and groups interact, perceive each other and participate in shared social and cultural life.

Evidence shows that cohesion outcomes tend to emerge through five recurring domains widely recognised in global frameworks (UNDP 2020; OECD 2025):

- Belonging and identity
- Interpersonal and intergroup trust
- Mutual recognition and dignity
- Connectedness and cooperation
- Participation and agency

These dimensions reinforce the British Council’s relational interpretation of social cohesion and align with international policy frameworks emphasising rights, participation and diversity (UNESCO 2010; Council of Europe 2010).

## **Common mechanisms observed across programmes**

The desk research highlights several mechanisms through which arts, culture and dialogue most consistently influence social cohesion. The following mechanisms appear across British Council evaluations and independent studies (British Council 2016–2023; UNESCO 2022; EUNIC 2021).

### **Identity, belonging and shared memory**

Programmes in contexts such as Colombia, Rwanda, Palestine, Vietnam and Ukraine demonstrate that cultural participation strengthens local identity, supports memory work and reinforces continuity in contexts marked by trauma, displacement or generational rupture (British Council 2019; UWS 2018; UNESCO 2022). Shared cultural processes help rebuild emotional and symbolic foundations for belonging.

### **Trust-building and improved intergroup relations**

Cultural settings provide low-risk environments for interaction across social, ethnic, religious or political divides. Participatory arts, such as music, theatre, craft and storytelling, support empathy, reduce social distance and facilitate positive contact (UNESCO 2010; European Commission 2023; EUNIC 2021). This aligns with the British Council’s emphasis on culture as an enabler of dialogue and mutual understanding.

### **Voice, agency and civic participation**

Multiple studies highlight that co-creation strengthens participants’ sense of agency and civic responsibility (BC Colombia 2019; CPF Palestine 2020; British Council 2023). Cultural processes enable marginalised communities, young people and women to articulate perspectives, develop leadership skills and participate more actively in public life.

### **Wellbeing, resilience and emotional safety**

Arts-based approaches offer trauma-sensitive routes for emotional processing, as evidenced by findings from Syria, Colombia, Rwanda and other conflict-affected settings (UWS 2018; British Council 2019). Improved wellbeing is repeatedly identified as an enabling condition for participation, trust-building and constructive dialogue (UNDP 2020).

### **Safe spaces for dialogue and conflict transformation**

Evaluations and practitioner reports demonstrate that cultural spaces often function as safe, neutral environments where sensitive issues can be addressed constructively (UNESCO 2010; EUNIC 2021). Such spaces are particularly important in fragile settings with low levels of institutional trust.

### **Skills, networks and social capital**

Cultural programmes frequently strengthen networks, transferable skills and livelihood opportunities. While not social cohesion outcomes in themselves, these outcomes reinforce stability, confidence and interpersonal connectedness (CCHC Vietnam 2019; British Council 2016), supporting wider social cohesion processes.

## Enabling conditions for social cohesion outcomes

Across the reviewed documents, social cohesion outcomes depend on several enabling conditions consistently emphasised by global and programme-level evidence (UNESCO 2022; OECD 2025; EUNIC 2021):

- **Local ownership and participatory design:** Strong results emerge when communities lead and define priorities.
- **Long-term, iterative engagement:** Sustained relationships and repeated contact deepen attitudinal and relational change (British Council 2019; UNDP 2020).
- **Inclusive participation:** Representation of youth, women, minorities and displaced groups is critical for legitimacy and belonging.
- **Safe, rights-based environments:** Cultural rights, dignity and freedom of expression underpin meaningful participation (UNESCO 2010; Council of Europe 2010).
- **Context sensitivity and Do No Harm:** Conflict analysis and cultural competence are essential in fragile settings (OECD 2020; EUNIC 2021).
- **Active, collaborative cultural practice:** Co-creation consistently generates stronger social cohesion outcomes than passive exposure (European Commission 2023; Matarasso 2019).

## Risks, limitations and observed challenges

The desk research also identifies limitations and risks that are relevant to this evaluation:

- **Risk of reproducing divisions** if programmes privilege dominant narratives or exclude marginalised groups (UNESCO 2022; Bernard 1999).
- **Short-term activities show limited cohesion effects**, especially in fragile environments (OECD 2025).
- **Measurement challenges** due to the intangible and long-term nature of relational outcomes (UNECE 2023).
- **Potential politicisation** of cultural work in conflict-affected settings (EUNIC 2021; UWS 2018).
- **Structural conditions (such as inequality and governance deficits) lie outside programme influence** and should be treated as context (UNDP 2020; OECD 2025).

These considerations reinforce the need for a focused and context-sensitive evaluation approach.

## Implications for this evaluation

The findings suggest several implications that have informed the design of the evaluation framework for this project:

- Social cohesion outcomes should focus on **relational and attitudinal dimensions**, such as trust, belonging, recognition, participation, mutual understanding and perceived safety (UNDP 2020; OECD 2025).
- The evaluation should consider **horizontal cohesion** (intergroup relations) and **vertical cohesion** (community–institution relations) (UNDP 2020; EUNIC 2021).
- Structural shifts should be treated as **contextual variables**, not programme outputs (OECD 2025).
- **Mixed-methods approaches** are required to capture perceptions, relational dynamics and lived experience (QUDRA 2, 2023; British Council 2019).
- Indicators need to be **context-sensitive**, reflecting variations between fragile, post-conflict and diverse environments.
- The evaluation should assess **enabling conditions** (such as local ownership, inclusion, cultural rights, conflict sensitivity and continuity) as determinants of programme effectiveness (UNESCO 2022; EUNIC 2021).

In summary, this initial desk research highlights a consistent pattern across British Council and international practice: arts, culture and intercultural dialogue strengthen the relational drivers of social cohesion through identity-building, trust formation, mutual recognition, participation and emotional resilience. While cultural interventions cannot directly address structural inequalities or political instability, they create the social conditions through which communities navigate difference, rebuild trust and sustain inclusive participation.

## Headline Summary of Initial Literature Review

### Introduction and global context

The British Council’s social cohesion work is situated within a global landscape marked by declining institutional trust, rising social fragmentation and increasing polarisation. The *World Social Report 2025* highlights converging drivers of cohesion decline across many regions: widening inequalities, economic insecurity, conflict, misinformation, and weakened civic institutions. These trends have direct implications for the contexts in which the British Council operates, particularly in fragile, conflict-affected and ODA-eligible settings, and reinforce the relevance of arts- and culture-led approaches that foster trust, empathy and constructive dialogue.

The British Council defines its contribution to social cohesion as creating opportunities for people to come together across divides, supporting civil society and artists to co-create, co-learn and strengthen community outcomes. This aligns closely with contemporary cultural relations thinking, which positions culture as a relational practice grounded in mutuality, shared values, and respect for diversity.

The literature confirms that **arts and cultural engagement are well placed to influence relational and attitudinal dimensions of cohesion** (such as trust, belonging, connectedness and participation) rather than broader socio-economic conditions. These insights shape the conceptual basis for this evaluation.

## **Definitions and conceptualisations of social cohesion**

### Contemporary academic perspectives

Recent scholarly work converges on social cohesion as a **multidimensional construct** spanning individual, community and institutional levels. Moustakas (2023) distinguishes between:

- **Core cohesion dimensions:** belonging, social relations, orientation toward the common good
- **Antecedents:** inequality, segregation, education, norms
- **Consequences:** wellbeing, stability, prosperity

This distinction is essential for evaluation: cohesion should not be conflated with broader social outcomes. Arts and cultural relations programmes most plausibly influence the **core attitudinal and relational dimensions**, including intergroup trust, connectedness, identification and civic participation.

Fonseca et al. (2019), cited in the RFP, offer a broader, multicultural and dynamic definition. Its strength lies in its flexibility and its alignment with the British Council's work across diverse contexts. However, the breadth carries risks of **conceptual inflation**, which complicates indicator development and attribution. For evaluation, maintaining focus on tractable relational dimensions mitigates this risk.

### Classical perspectives

Jenson's (2010) foundational analysis identifies three traditions in cohesion debates: cohesion as **social inclusion**, as **social capital**, and as **institutional capacity**. These traditions highlight why cohesion remains flexible and context-dependent, and why measurement approaches vary widely. They also underscore the limits of attempting to measure cohesion as a single composite outcome.

### UK policy perspectives

The House of Lords Library (2024) and UK Government Rapid Review (2023) identify a consistent set of cohesion domains: trust, belonging, participation, recognition, inclusion and safety. Both caution against overly broad definitions that dilute analytical clarity. Importantly, UK policy sources highlight the **global-local connectivity of cohesion**: international conflicts can have direct impacts on domestic community relations. This strengthens the argument that the British Council's international cultural relations work can have indirect positive effects on UK cohesion.

### Critiques of the concept

Scholars such as Bernard (1999) and Swain & Urban (2024) warn that cohesion can become a **fuzzword**, masking power dynamics or legitimising policy choices without clarity about underlying values. These critiques reinforce the need for a **precise, operationally useful definition** for evaluation, focused on relational dimensions.

### Adjacent and complementary concepts

Several adjacent frameworks enrich understanding of cohesion:

- **Fragility (OECD 2025)**: cohesion as a cross-cutting factor affecting risk and resilience.
- **Social infrastructure (RSA 2024)**: spaces, networks and institutions that enable participation and connection.
- **Council of Europe (2004, 2010)**: rights-based participation, dignity, recognition and co-designed heritage processes.
- **Porto Santo Charter (2021)**: cultural democracy, participation and shared governance.
- **Adler (2023)**: global cohesion emerging from practices and relationships across communities of practice.
- **Aid and cohesion studies (Danquah & Ouattara 2023)**: foreign aid strengthening intergroup cooperation in low-cohesion settings.

These perspectives underline that cohesion is relational, participatory and sensitive to context—key principles for evaluating arts-based interventions.

## **Arts, culture and social cohesion: pathways and evidence**

### Mechanisms of cohesion in cultural settings

Eriksson's (2023) empirical work provides a robust framework for understanding how cultural participation generates cohesion:

- **Bonding cohesion**: internal support, safety, shared identity
- **Bridging cohesion**: connection across difference
- **Relational vs ideal cohesion**: interpersonal encounters versus symbolic identification

Cultural spaces and infrastructures play a critical enabling role. Artefacts (e.g. books, crafts, heritage documents) serve as mediators of reflection and dialogue. These findings align strongly with the British Council's cultural relations approach.

### International evidence

The European Commission's *Culture and Democracy* review (2023), drawing on 53 countries, finds that cultural participation strengthens cohesion by:

1. deepening belonging, trust and intergroup understanding
2. enhancing civic agency and participation

Outcomes are strongest where participation is active, collaborative and inclusive, rather than passive. Inequalities in access to culture represent **cohesion risks**.

EU policy work (2019) emphasises the enabling conditions for cohesion through culture: co-creation, diversity, representation, empowerment, and cross-sector collaboration.

#### Intercultural dialogue

UNESCO's intercultural dialogue frameworks (2022, 2025) position dialogue-enabled interaction as a key mechanism of cohesion, linking conditions (rights, freedoms), capabilities (skills), opportunities (spaces, institutions) and outcomes (trust, recognition). These models further emphasise the role of arts, storytelling and cultural ecosystems in fostering cohesion.

#### Participation as a driver

Policy and practice evidence (CoE, PHF, Matarasso) converge on the importance of **participation**, rather than access alone, as the driver of social outcomes. Cohesion emerges through collaborative creation, shared decision-making and community agency.

#### Cultural relations in fragile contexts

EUNIC (2021) and other practitioner sources show that cultural relations approaches – grounded in co-creation, dialogue and ethical partnership – consistently build horizontal (intergroup) and vertical (state–society) trust. These findings are particularly relevant to the British Council's programmes in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and humanitarian settings.

### **Frameworks for measuring social cohesion**

The literature identifies a diverse landscape of cohesion measurement approaches:

#### Broad cohesion frameworks

- **UK Rapid Review (2023):** common domains, perception-based indicators, risks of broad definitions, methodological challenges.
- **Cross-national frameworks (Delhey et al. 2023):** Social Cohesion Radar, Afrobarometer, VALCOS, WVS, Cohesion Regimes. Convergence on trust, belonging, participation, diversity acceptance; variations in breadth and rigor.
- **UNDP (2020):** trust, inclusion, shared identity; horizontal and vertical cohesion; drivers vs outcomes.
- **UNECE (2023):** caution against composite indices; multi-level, multi-dimensional measurement; methodological limitations.

- **Africa-focused framework (Leininger et al. 2021):** lean definition (trust, identity, cooperation); differentiation between inclusive and exclusive cooperation; strong relevance for ODA contexts.
- **QUDRA 2 (EU-GIZ, 2023):** highly practical MEL guidance for fragile and displacement settings; horizontal/vertical distinction; participatory mixed-methods.
- **SCORE Index:** sophisticated attitudinal modelling across 22+ countries; predictive pathways for trust, identity and resilience.

#### Culture-specific frameworks

- **UNESCO Culture|2030:** 22 indicators across four dimensions; strong relevance of inclusion & participation; cultural rights and representation.
- **Council of Europe IFCD:** cultural participation, access, education, infrastructure and openness linked to democratic health and civic participation.
- **Faro Convention Action Plan:** participatory, heritage-led methods for measuring inclusion, cooperation, recognition and democratic engagement.

These frameworks illustrate the range of measurement options and reinforce the need for a **context-sensitive, multidimensional, perception-oriented approach**.

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