Create Syria – Concept Note

Last Updated: November 2017

CREATE SYRIA – a collaboration between the British Council and Ettijahat- Independent Culture - seeks to increase the capacity of artists to contribute to the development of stronger, more cohesive communities through the design and delivery of high-quality community arts initiatives. The project will support artists to build their technical and artistic skills in community settings through providing tailored training, local and international peer-to-peer networking opportunities and seed funding for the implementation of innovative community arts initiatives.

Background & Rationale

In 2016, The British Council, Ettijahat- Independent Culture and International Alert designed and implemented Create Syria: a project to empower Syrian art in exile - a pilot project that supported 15 Syrian artists in Lebanon to develop and deliver impactful artistic initiatives in communities. The broad focus of the initiatives supported meant that while on an individual level the impact of the work – both on the artists and their participants - was clear, there is little evidence to suggest the artistic interventions delivered impact in the wider community. To capture the learning from this pilot and further refine the *Create Syria* model, the British Council ran an in-depth consultation with artists, cultural managers and institutions, and stakeholders from community-led and international organisations working to address social issues resulting from the Syrian crisis.   This consultation, which took place from January to May 2017 provided insight into the needs of Syrian cultural community and the challenges faced by the development community in working with the arts.

Throughout this consultation, it was clear that the majority of Syrian artists and arts institutions are seeking to deliver social impact through their artistic work. The creative response to the Syrian crisis has been significant and varied, and there is a large community of artists interested in using their skills and creative techniques to facilitate dialogue and work on specific development issues faced by communities. The key needs expressed by these stakeholders are summarised below:

- Artists often lack confidence and/or key skills to support community development and social change objectives through their work – for example skills in arts therapy techniques, arts for community dialogue, facilitation of inter-community co-creation and cooperation, participatory arts to support individual health and well-being etc.
- Information on best practice and international standards on delivering impact in communities through the arts is not readily available. Many stakeholders expressed a need for an info-bank and accessible tool kits for artists and community based organisations to use
- There is a lack of long term support for arts initiatives that are community based and artist-led – often initiatives are small and short-term, interventions lack depth and impact and are reliant on volunteers with low-level artistic or facilitation skills
- The isolation felt by many in the Syrian cultural community is exacerbated by a lack of opportunity for Syrian artists to collaborate with peers in host-community arts sectors - programmes that target only Syrians are contributing to isolation and division
- There is a lack of livelihood opportunities for artists and creatives - many rely on short-term grants or income from work outside the arts
- Artists are ignored by the international response and find it difficult to bridge working silos – there is a need to create broad-based coalitions and to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration between the

creative sectors and wider Syria response actors to enable artists to play a greater role in the social-political development of the areas where they are working
- There is a need to preserve cultural heritage – skills, cultural practice and memory, identity

The second iteration of the Create Syria project has been developed to respond to these key needs.

Aims and Objectives

Create Syria seeks to contribute to the following high level outcomes:
- The resilience of Syrian artists and the Syrian cultural sector is increased
- The resilience and well-being of refugee and host communities is increased now and in the longer-term

The project has the following two interwoven theories of change:

If we build the creative and managerial skills of artists and community based organisations working in the arts and provide them with spaces to develop their socially engaged practice and grow sustainable models and approaches **then** the well-being, confidence and resilience of both the artist and the communities they work with will increase**.**

If we provide greater space for exchange and dialogue between artists, community arts practitioners and the wider development community and we better document best practice and the positive role that artistic interventions can play in supporting community development **then** artists and community arts practitioners - and the cultural sector more broadly - will be able to leverage support from a wider range of funders and become more professional, sustainable and impactful in their work.

Create Syria 2 Objectives

SO 1 - The capacity of artists and community organisations to deliver high quality local artistic projects that have a positive community impact and contribute to building more cohesive communities is increased

SO2 - The participation of diverse communities (Syrians and non-Syrians) in quality arts initiatives is increased.

SO3 - Practical information on good practice in community arts is collected and made available to a wide range of stakeholders in order that it can be used to inspire artists, communities and development practitioners, inform policy development, and advocate the beneficial impact of the arts in response to the Syrian crisis

SO3 - New collaborations and links between UK and international practitioners and artists and community based organisations working in the arts in Lebanon and Syria are created.

Project Principles

Create Syria works under the following principles, all of which should be reflected in its projects:

- **Conflict sensitivity –** this project will operate in a conflict-sensitive way and will mitigate for the unintended consequences of action which could further polarise refugees and their host communities. All actions are undertaken with the aim to support development, stability and mutual cooperation in the region.
- **Cultural sensitivity –** Syrian cultural and artistic expression are at the heart of all activities. The project will use Syrian and Lebanese cultures as a medium through which to promote individual and community resilience in time of crisis and displacement.
- **Gender sensitivity –** gender plays a key role in the power dynamics of communities and an understanding of gender issues is vital to this project's success. The project will employ participation from a diverse range of people including men, women, and those of other gender identities.
- **Sustainability –** the project acts on the recognised concept that participation in the arts helps citizens (including refugees) to shift from a state of victimhood towards a state of proactive action where they are able to create and build their own futures. The project supports the development new approaches and models that support the sustainability of artistic work in communities
- **Artistic quality –** the project supports the professionalization of community arts initiatives and believes that increasing the participation of diverse and marginalised communities in high-quality arts initiatives can enhance community resilience and contribute to the wider social and economic development of communities in crisis. We support artists and community based organisations to play a leading role in this development process

Project Activities

In its initial stages, *Create Syria* will focus on Syrian artists and community-based arts initiatives in Lebanon with the aim to eventually expand the programme to Syria and other refugee hosting communities in MENA and Europe.   The programme will have the following outputs:

- **Greater local and international exchange & peer-to-peer learning in the field of community arts is supported through a series of networking events and master-classes**
- **Training curriculum and practical resources to support the development of arts in times of crisis/community arts activity Lebanon, Syria and other host countries in the region and developed and disseminated**
- **5 community arts initiatives participate in a structured professional development programme and receive seed financing to enable them to development new models and approaches**
- **A piece of research/evaluation is produced to enable more effective evidence-based advocacy on the role of arts in culture in community development**

ACTIVITY BREAKDOWN:

Component 1 – Supporting networking and sharing of models, approaches and best practice between artists and community based groups with an interest in the arts (March 2017 – December 2018)

During the course Create Syria 2 we will host two networking events:

<u>**Syrian Delegation at British Council and Arts Council England Social Arts Symposium – March 2018**</u>

In March 2018 Arts Council England and British Council will present a national one-day symposium to explore a wide range of innovative practices in participatory, socially-engaged and community focussed arts, from both a UK and international perspective. The *Create Syria* programme will support up to five Syrian artists or community actors who lead participatory arts programmes in Lebanon and/or Syria to travel to the UK to participate in this forum. While in the UK we will provide them opportunities to visit some of the UK's leading community arts initiatives and meet with UK peers. This visit will give the participating artists an opportunity to learn about the UK community arts sector and build connections with potential collaborators and partners for the development of their own work. *(See separate concept note on Social Arts Symposium for more information)*

<u>**Ettijahat and British Council Regional Community Arts Forum – Lebanon – November 2018**</u>

In October 2018, we will host a community arts forum/meet-up in Lebanon - bringing together artists, community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs with an interest in community arts work from across Lebanon, Syria and the UK to share information on their work and network with peers and potential collaborators. The forum will raise awareness of innovative and impactful models and approaches to community arts in the region and the UK. It will also be used to gather information on best-practice and the challenges being faced by those working in this space. The forum will also be used to promote the work done through the *'Art in Communities' Professional Development Programme* and give artists and community based organisations who have participated in the programme a chance to share what they've learnt and achieved through the programme and raise the profile of their work.

In addition to these two events we also hope to be able to support other smaller events and exchanges throughout the project delivery period. These might include masterclasses, panel discussions and professional talks.

Component 2 – 'Art in Communities' Professional Development Programme (June– Dec 2018)

The purpose of the component is to support artists and/or community organisations to develop new models and approaches to increase the social impact and sustainability of their work. The curriculum/learning journey for this 'professional development' programme will be developed collaboratively by a UK community arts expert (identified by the British Council) and a local expert (identified by Ettijahat). This curriculum will be piloted with the 5 participating initiatives from June to November 2018. The curriculum will be refined and developed throughout this period based on the feedback and needs of the participating initiatives. At the end of the pilot parts of the refined curriculum will be turned into a toolkit with accessible information for artists, community leaders, NGO staff and other practitioners on how to develop community arts programmes in the Syrian context.

The exact content of this curriculum will be developed from March to June 2018 but components in the programme may include:

- Tailored training on project design and management , conflict sensitivity, fundraising and business-development planning and monitoring and evaluation
- Mentoring and accompaniment from experienced arts professionals – including UK based mentors where appropriate
- Opportunities for participants to visit local and international initiatives and build their creative network (peer-to-peer learning)
- Seed funding to support the development and testing of new models or approaches

Applications to join the pilot programme will be encouraged from **individual artists** and **community based organisations** and **NGOs** with an interest in artistic programming. Collaboration and partnership between these different types of applicants will be encouraged. Applications will be accepted from Syrian and Lebanese nationals and preference will be given to those working with a mix of Syrian and Lebanese participants through their initiative. The pilot will work with 5 initiatives but this can be extended subject to additional funding becoming available.

Component 3 – Research, Advocacy and Building a Community of Practice: illustrating the impact of arts programming in communities affected by the Syrian crisis. (June - December 2018)

A small piece of research will be commissioned to review current best practice in community arts programming and develop a position paper illustrating how arts programming can support individual and community resilience and be better integrated into the international response to the Syrian crisis. This will be used to advocate for greater support for community arts work from development donors active in the region. The research may include the preparation of case studies highlighting best practice in Syria and the broader Syrian context, in the UK and other relevant contexts (using Create Syria 1 projects as case studies if appropriate).