

Painting a different picture: the power of the arts in education, health and conflict-resolution

By **Amber Sainsbury**, Founder, Dramatic Need



The arts help to cope with trauma, interpret and communicate experience, relieve suffering, confront long-held community taboos, individualise, inspire and re-humanise. This article looks at the necessity of moving arts-led development initiatives from the periphery to the core of development policy, particularly with regard to long-term development targets such as the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

The advantages of arts-based approaches to education and conflict resolution have been long overlooked. Faced with the current global economic crisis, it is possible that investment in arts and cultural development policies will decline further. This could mean the loss of a considerable opportunity in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the wider arena of human development.

It is easy to dismiss arts-based development programmes as trivial in the face of core socio-economic targets. However, since the failure of the so-called 'Basic Needs' development theories in the late 1970s, many government bodies and non-governmental agencies have acknowledged the need for an approach that treats the human condition rather than just the physical symptoms of deprivation and conflict.

The UN Charter on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children should have a fundamental right to 'freedom of expression' and that this right should include "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, ... in print, [or] in the form of art" (Article 13, UNCRC, 1990). It also states that it is the right of the child "to engage in play, to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (Article 31, UNCRC, 1990).

The subject has been widely examined, not least in the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and the 2005 UK Department for International Development (DFID) Commission for Africa Report. A lack of both investment and proven methodologies to measure impact means that evidence of arts-based initiatives aiding development remains largely anecdotal. However, these publications, and many others, emphasise the ability of arts-led initiatives to disseminate information and 'get a message through' in a universally accessible, non-didactic way. Crucially, they also point to the essential human need for cultural expression.

"There is an emerging recognition that cultural expression is both a human development goal in itself and also a means to achieve other forms of development... despite [this] there remain notably few organisations open to the notion of working meaningfully with culture."

Andrew Firmin and Mark Nowotny,
 'Culture: the missing pillar of development' in the
 Commonwealth Foundation Report, 'Putting culture first:
 Commonwealth perspectives on culture and development'

Art from the start

The arts have been proven to aid children in understanding context and content and help them assimilate information more easily. Education remains at sub-standard levels in many post-conflict and low-income areas. Tools, such as the arts, that enable the circumnavigation of literacy and language barriers are essential in these communities. British child psychologist Kathleen Doorbar, who has worked extensively with traumatised and underprivileged children, explains, "Children may be able to draw things even though they can't speak about them. It is a brilliant way for them to get their feelings down – and to get rid of those feelings. Once it is on paper, it is real and can be dealt with. While it is in their head, they can't formalise it."

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It has long been acknowledged in the education policies of the developed world that creative approaches to learning can foster confidence, improve visual literacy, encourage participation with others and stimulate cognitive processes. Music, art and drama can inspire children to create something over which they have ownership. This is particularly important in circumstances where children struggle with lack of self-worth. For children who are uninterested or intimidated by the learning process, the arts can offer an alternative access point from which they can work towards achieving sound goals.

The theatre of conflict

The arts, when used to relieve trauma, offer a path to rehabilitation more holistic and comprehensive than simply providing the means for physical and infrastructural restoration. Writing in 'The Times', London, about the recent conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, film-director and Dramatic Need trustee Danny Boyle states:

"To suggest that the only things that maintain our humanity are those that serve our biological needs seems to me palpably incorrect. We are not just what we eat. We are also what we feel, what we fear, what we love and what we hate. Unexpressed



"The arts can aid a child's holistic development, especially empathy, which is defined as the ability to identify and express one's own emotions and to read another's emotions correctly and comprehensively. The arts stimulate a problem-finding attitude that can be used in non-arts areas, including conflict resolution."

Ashfaq Ishaq,
Executive Director of the International Child Art Foundation

tensions find their strength in violence. I look at the Congo now; if there is not a means to move beyond the hatred of the past, we will never move past violence.

"I am not suggesting that we drop paint-brushes on Goma. But I am suggesting that post-conflict relief should look to means of coping with and expressing individual trauma, and that the arts can play a vital role. Whether visual or performance-based, they can be psychotherapeutic. They allow people to participate in their own recovery, help them to relocate and resuscitate their sense of self. It's not for nothing that the arts are called the humanities; they humanise us."

When people living through conflict, or in abject poverty, are given the means to articulate their suffering to their peers and communities, it provides them with the tools with which they can maintain human dignity, therefore preserving the hope of an effective recovery in a post-conflict environment.



In terms of ethnic conflict, by emphasising the humanity of other ethnic groups and encouraging non-verbal communication skills, the arts can be hugely beneficial when attempting to cross the ethnic divide. Successful arts-led initiatives outside Commonwealth member countries such as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in Israel and the Arab States, the Mashirika Theatre Project in Rwanda, and the Cypriot Peace Through Art Project have proven that the arts are a means through which cultural diversity can be respected and ethnic hatred overcome.

"Our project may not change the world, but it is a step forward. It is an ongoing dialogue, where the universal language of music links with the continuous dialogue that we have with young people, and that young people have with each other."

Daniel Barenboim,
co-founder of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

"Music breeds an atmosphere of tolerance and basic humanity that is able to transcend national, social and historical boundaries. By igniting the imagination and feeding the basic human need to create, music in conflict areas can reverse long-held prejudices."

Andy Staples,
Trustee, the Choir of London

In Darfur in 2007, 500 drawings by Sudanese refugee children fleeing across the border into Chad were passed on to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as evidence of attacks by Sudanese government troops. This 'testimony' by children, some as young as eight, was made possible by a peace campaigner trying to distract the children with paper and crayons as she interviewed their mothers. While a child as young as eight cannot be expected to effectively vocalise the trauma experienced in conflict environments, art is non-threatening and easy to assimilate. In the short term, arts-led programmes in conflict environments can provide both an outlet for anger and grief and a means to express and address a particular experience. However, in the long term, when approached methodically, the arts can be used to fundamentally change the outlook of both victims and perpetrators.

Positive images: the arts and HIV/AIDS

"We risk a failure of words, of concepts, of sympathetic insight in the face of AIDS. We need to fight this failure. We need to respond with imagination and compassion to what is happening around us."

Judge Edwin Cameron,
(a leading figure in the fight against AIDS in South Africa) in 'Human Rights, Racism and AIDS: The New Discrimination', *South African Journal on Human Rights*, Volume 9, 1993, p 29

Although there have been some recent successes in the fight against HIV and AIDS, the pandemic continues to have devastating consequences in many developing nations. Its spread is aided and abetted by silence and misinformation. It is crucial that victims, their families and communities are encouraged to bear witness and keep a record of their experiences, thereby creating a dialogue from which others can learn.

For those governments that advocate the EAFIC approach (Education, Abstinence, Fidelity, use of Condom), the arts, in particular interactive theatre, can have a significant impact. Role-play helps young people to explore the social and cultural prejudices surrounding the issue of AIDS without feeling personally indicted by their peers. An example of this is Themba, an interactive theatre company that has reached more than 50,000 young South Africans. Themba use theatrical role-play to approach themes including HIV prevention, stigmatisation, safe sex, fidelity, acceptance and abstinence. They have succeeded in making readily approachable issues that may previously have been taboo within some South African communities.

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In Chandigarh, India, as a part of their AIDS Awareness campaign, the Servants of the People society continue to hold successful theatre, dance and music workshops for slum children whose parents are drug addicts. The workshops are designed to address the children's emotional difficulties and to prevent them following the life patterns established by their parents. The African Red Cross in Cameroon and Namibia have successfully used theatre as a mechanism for community education about HIV and AIDS. In Swaziland, a country with the world's highest adult HIV prevalence rate of 26.1 per cent





A Dramatic Need youth theatre group perform a play they have written on HIV & AIDS, Free State, South Africa.

(UNAIDS, 2008), the Swaziland Theatre for Children and Young People (SWATCYP) organisation has initiated grassroots Community Youth Theatre Projects across the country, helping to engage young people in the process of understanding and preventing the spread of HIV. Writing in the 'Lancet', the Director of the Zimbabwe AIDS Prevention Project, Elizabeth Mbizvo, comments that "the myths that surround sexual behaviour and cultural practices associated with HIV infection need to be challenged and the silence broken; the success of community theatre in achieving these objectives is well documented."

"The power of [art] to transport us from isolation to a sense of community, even if only imaginary, is particularly important in a context where so many people are made to feel cast out – alone with illness, with loss, with grief."

Kylie Thomas and Meg Samuelson,
'Nobody ever said AIDS', 2004, Kwela, Cape Town

The girl in the picture

The third goal of the Millennium Development Goals is to improve gender equality and empower women. With the 2015 deadline fast approaching, there are still major obstacles to be surmounted. These include gender disparity in secondary school education, violence against women, sub-standard working conditions, and the increased incidence of HIV infection amongst women. Visual art and theatre can be particularly effective in confronting these difficult issues and giving women a voice.

In Durban, South Africa, the cultural organisation Art for Humanity (AFH) has initiated a series of projects showcasing the works of 50 local women poets and artists displayed on billboards throughout the country to draw attention to violence against women. In the Northern Free State, South Africa, Dramatic Need has run extensive workshops using theatre to reverse gender roles. Young men and women are asked to create scenes on domestic violence which are performed twice; in the first instance the men and women are in their traditional roles

'It made me laugh at first, playing a lady, but after a while I understood what it must be like, you can't really fight when you're a woman. You've got no power. It's not good.'

14-year-old Bongani Motshabi from the
Dramatic Need Gender-Bender Theatre Project, South Africa

and in the second the women play the part of the men and vice versa. This urges young men to consider the position of women in their community and encourages an open dialogue about violence against women.

Community participation and the arts

The interactive nature of most arts-led development initiatives means that social inclusion and community capacity building can be greatly enhanced. However, the content of any arts based programme must be designed with a thorough understanding of social norms, behaviours, and attitudes within a prospective community. When using the arts to cross social barriers, it is important that these barriers are first thoroughly understood and respected. There is little point orchestrating programmes that effectively 'import' arts awareness, or art mediums, from more developed countries, without first acknowledging what can be utilised on the ground. What works in one community may not work in another. The appropriate sourcing of local knowledge and an adequate understanding of pre-established artistic traditions of a community must be investigated before an arts-led initiative can be expected to make headway. The empowering quality of the arts can only be effectively commandeered if it is fully participatory and this in turn can only be achieved through adequate research into a prospective audience. Community leaders need to be consulted and involved in the process as much as possible.

Moving forward

Most education initiatives in developing countries would benefit from the inclusion of an element of the creative arts. There must be a concerted effort to support successful grassroots models, while expanding the mandate of governmental arts and cultural policies to include clear processes and methodology based on internationally recognised development practice. Only then will arts-led initiatives have a sustainable impact at a national level.

Although there has been a Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport since 2005, there is currently no equivalent for the arts. In 2009, the Commonwealth Foundation is launching a working group on culture and development. This group will work to gain the support of governments in placing a greater emphasis on the role of arts in development agendas across the Commonwealth. I am hoping that this means the arts may finally be given the chance to play the leading role they deserve.

Amber Sainsbury trained as an actress at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Arts in London. She has taught drama extensively across Africa, particularly in South Africa and Sierra Leone. She was a keynote speaker at the British Arts Council's Creative Partnerships Conference 2009 on the role of the arts in development. She founded Dramatic Need in 2007 and continues to teach workshops in conflict resolution for the charity. Email: amber@dramaticneed.org

Dramatic Need is a UK-registered charity (number 1119443) that sends international arts professionals (such as musicians, artists and actors) to host workshops in underprivileged and rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The charity promotes creative expression as a tool for conflict resolution, social development, gender empowerment and the assimilation of health messages in underprivileged communities. The Official Patron is Her Excellency Dr Lindiwe Mabuzi, South African High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. The Board of Trustees includes the Oscar-winning film director Danny Boyle and South African-born actor Sir Antony Sher.

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