

Partner South East Asia

Arts for all?

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- **Lack of access to arts is a human rights issue.**
- **The arts can offer everyone huge benefits, but some people are excluded, like ethnic minorities. To include them, cultural and arts sectors need to go further into rural areas.**
- **Disabled people need access to the arts through education and spaces for them to create and exhibit work.**
- **Healing through arts can be used as an intervention in mental healthcare.**
- **Country champions need to be identified and developed to build capacity in the arts.**
- **It is important to involve diverse groups in projects to offer different points of view and avoid personal biases.**

Overview

This session on inclusive arts examined the status of arts and inclusion in Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar, as well as the challenges faced by arts practitioners there.

Dr Alice Fox, Principal Lecturer, University of Brighton, UK, gave an overview of the definition of inclusive arts.

Dr San San Oo from Myanmar, **Rhadem Musawah** from the Philippines, and **Dr Nitipat Pholchai** and **Sophon Tubklong** from Thailand shared their experiences working on inclusive arts in their respective countries.

They then regrouped for a panel discussion on the improvements needed to make arts more inclusive in the region.

Building country champions for capacity building: Dr Alice Fox



Alice has collaborated with the British Council across South East Asia on developing inclusive arts capacity in the region. She is also co-writer of the book [*Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto*](#).

‘Arts for everyone’ supports anyone taking part in creative activities as artists and audiences. Making good quality art challenges perceptions of who can be an artist. Collaborating with different people for inclusive arts produces interesting and productive conversations.

There are groups of people who struggle to access the cultural sector more than others. This includes ethnic minorities, people with physical or learning disabilities, refugees, homeless people, people with mental health issues, women's groups and older people. Without their participation in arts, the cultural sector would be impoverished as their voices and stories are missing. Lack of access to arts can be framed as a human rights issue.

There are five principles of inclusive arts:

- It must be mutually beneficial for everyone involved.
- Arts projects offer opportunities for people working on them to develop knowledge and skills that they may lack.
- It has learning and unlearning elements to challenge preconceptions and prejudices.
- It provides a platform for voices, experiences and ambitions to be heard and seen.
- It offers high quality artworks and experiences to people who may have poor quality experiences or undervalued experiences in the past.

Arts for all can serve functions like:

- Start conversations between different groups of people who may not otherwise meet.
- Provoke and highlight issues such as women's issues.

- Work with specific groups like older people and people with disabilities.
- Discuss issues like the climate crisis.
- Act as a research tool for artistic forms of inquiry.
- Help with strategic planning by including the voices of all stakeholders.



An example of a performance in Kathmandu using the pushing of melting ice to highlight issues of women's work.



Images above taken from Dr Alice Fox's presentation

Inclusive arts create activities and conversations that can be used for provocation, education, cultural development, social and community development, personal development and research. Their benefits are measured in various categories as shown in the chart above.

There are three stages of capacity building for countries:

- **Knowledge exchange** through forums and listening meetings to identify country champions.
- **Theory training** delivered by country champions and UK partners.
- **Project delivery** through action learning, mentoring and grants to fund project development and delivery.



Image taken from Dr Alice Fox's presentation, showing an example of capacity building in Viet Nam.

There are three steps to increase capacity in South East Asia:

- Identify, develop and listen to country champions.
- Provide training by setting up knowledge exchange between country champions and the UK.
- Disseminate champions to train and support creative hubs across the country.

Arts as intervention in mental healthcare: Dr San San Oo

Dr San San Oo works with Aung Clinic Mental Health Initiative, a community-based mental health space in Myanmar that uses arts as an intervention. It engages people with lived experience to help people in mental institutions as access to mental healthcare is limited under Myanmar's [1912 Lunacy Act](#).

It conducts inclusive arts activities such as:

- **Community cooking** as a collective act of sharing and healing.
- **Neuroplasticity**, an arts programme that supports income generation and independent living.
- **Self-exploratory art** for self-expression and self-engagement for positive relationships.
- **Ethnic community theatre** to nurture creative autonomy for minority groups.
- **Mental health education programme** that involves artistic participation of trainees and artistic training by trainers.
- **Ethnic collective drawing** for participants to experience free movement.
- **Ethnic cultural cooking** to build community strength and resiliency.
- **Art during crisis** as a therapy during Covid-19.
- **Local and international meetings** to engage with activists, journalists, mental healthcare professionals and artists.
- **Exhibitions** to reach out to more people.

The organisation faces challenges in its advocacy work and initiatives as public or community art is not yet fully developed in Myanmar. Hence, contemporary art activities tend to be closely scrutinised by government authorities.

Representation brings voices of marginalised groups to the table: Rhadem Musawah



Rhadem is an Indigenous gay Muslim Documentary Filmmaker and Human Rights Activist with [Mujer-LGBT](#) in the Philippines.

Arts is an inclusive culture for Rhadem, who sees it as a platform for marginalised people to express what they want.

When creating arts to voice a vision or stories, there should be an intention to unlearn, learn, master and harness talents for the right work.

Before the pandemic, arts was used to engage children and teenagers in armed conflict regions in southern Philippines and provide psychosocial therapy for the victims of violence and war. Arts programmes included Indigenous people, workers and LGBT members to let them express themselves through arts at a time when they're silenced by violence.

Rhadem's films touches on the themes of human rights, arts and culture to bring the stories of his region and its people who need representation to the spotlight. He sees this as his responsibility as a person with intersecting marginalisation.

Artists need to understand representation and know their strengths and limits. They must be aware of what's happening in their areas as well as their personal biases to serve people through their work.

Personal biases can hinder inclusiveness in arts and diverse representation that are important to deliver the message and give justice to whomever is represented in the art. When representing a certain culture, the artist's own culture should not cloud the work.

Communicating messages correctly would have ripple effects such as raising donations and spreading word-of-mouth.

Rhadem's documentaries incorporate fictional cinematography to provide entertainment value as people in the Philippines find documentary films boring. He added that for his projects, he would bring onboard people from diverse groups like Indigenous people, people of different faiths and the LGBT community to provide different perspectives.

The barriers that he faces in his work are social, cultural, political, intersectional and structural. While intersectional marginalisation is seen as a barrier to producing art, it can also bring uniqueness to the table and a new perspective to the audience. Structural barriers are fundraising. While there are agencies that offer cultural arts grants, funding can be politicised, especially for third world countries.

How to include disabled people in the arts experience: Spine Party Movement

[Spine Party Movement](#) was represented by **Dr Nitipat Pholchai (Ong)** and **Sophon Tubklong (Toffee)**.

Ong is a Dance Artist, Facilitator and Educator with a background in physics. Toffee is a blind Dancer, TV Host and Acting Coach. They collaborate through Spine Party Movement, a dance-based collective that promotes somatic movement and body practices and arts inclusion for people with disabilities.



Image taken from Spine Party Movement's presentation. The British Council commissioned Spine Party Movement to gather information about Thailand's disability arts scene.

Ong met Toffee in 2015 when Toffee joined his dance workshop. They met again in 2017 when Toffee was performing with a physical therapist. That piqued Ong's curiosity about how Toffee could share his world through movement and dance. This led to their collaboration on a contact improvisation project.

In 2018, he worked with Toffee and art therapist Zign Tancharoen on The Nose Project's [/ See You, You See Me](#). The project paired creative participants with blind people for them to experience blindness and learn how to work with blind people.

In 2021, [Kelola Foundation](#), a cultural foundation from Indonesia, recognised Ong's work with Toffee, and gave them an initiation funding for their research and creative work on blind dancing.

In October 2021, they published their [work](#) on the Blind Rituals Online Gallery. Blind Rituals is an artistic research about the blind dancing body. It questions what if blindness is not a stereotype, but an act of experiencing. Through this experience, blind and sighted people can learn through bodily perceptions. The work articulates the self-development and self-healing aspects of art which are not well-known in Thailand.

One of the main challenges that the two have been trying to overcome is normalising the sharing of experiences of disabled people and their lives. Many of the projects they're involved in are based on the charity model, like CSR programmes, which is short-termed.

Another obstacle is how to normalise arts as it's perceived as a luxury in Thailand. This is reflected in arts education in school, where the focus is on techniques. There needs to be an alternative vision of art as basic human need for expression, creativity, healing and self and collective empowerment.

There is also a shortage of soft and hard infrastructure, with difficulty in getting a dedicated physical space, transportation and scheduling management support.

Panel discussion: How to make the arts and creative sectors more inclusive in your country?

For Dr San San Oo, inclusive arts is about making connections and connecting with feelings during difficult times.

Rhadem shared that marginalised communities lack opportunities to participate in the arts. Therefore, arts programmes need to be truly available for everyone, not just to those who have easy access to it, but also to people in remote areas and faraway regions.

For Toffee, arts must be recognised in education for the disabled. Arts facilities and infrastructure also need to be available for the disabled so that they can show their work to the public. When the public sees that disabled people can make art, this will create awareness about them and fight the stereotypes and stigma of people with disabilities.

Watch the video recording [here](#).