

Partner South East Asia

Climate change: What does it mean for arts and cultural rights?

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- **In this session, organisations, artists and activists discussed the impact of climate change on arts and cultural rights. They also touched on the role arts and culture play in bringing up climate conversations at the local and global levels.**
- **Cultural voices are the missing link in climate negotiations. They're needed to make public connection and push to inform the national cultural policy.**
- **Architecture can effect change in reducing the harmful effects of building and construction by making use of local, sustainable materials. Architects should tap into the traditional wisdom of respecting the local climate and environment to address contemporary challenges.**
- **To make progress in slowing down global warming, climate change needs to be addressed as a cultural and human issue, not just a scientific or policy-based one.**
- **Indigenous artist Shaq Koyok uses art to fight for his people's land rights.**
- **British-Australian artist David Finnigan draws on his home country's experience of the worst fires to inject climate change issues into his work.**

Overview

Today's global youth views climate change as its main challenge. While climate change is recognised as a human rights crisis, the cultural rights aspect is overlooked.

Organisation leaders, artists and activists from diverse backgrounds came together to discuss how they approach climate change in their work and discuss questions like:

- Are current policies addressing climate change?
- Can sustainability be addressed exclusively through technological or scientific solutions?
- Should we listen to and learn more from indigenous communities?

The event was hosted by Florence Lambert, Head of Arts and Creative Industries, British Council Malaysia.

Dr Milena Dragicevic Secic moderated the session. She's a former president of the University of Arts Belgrade and founder of the UNESCO Chair on Interculturalism, Art Management and Mediation.

Panel: Impact and policy

Cultural voices are the missing link in climate negotiations: Alison Tickle

Alison is Founder and CEO of [Julie's Bicycle](#), an NGO founded by the UK music industry to mobilise the arts and culture sector for actions on climate and ecological crisis. They've partnered with over 2,000 organisations internationally on high-impact programmes and policy measures since 2007.

Julie's Bicycle operates on three core principles:

- Culture and the arts must be at the heart of the global response to climate crisis
- Collective imagination and joint purpose must be brought to challenges
- Action comes in many guises from everywhere, and everything counts

Alison stated that remodelling our societies and patterns of consumption, allowing polluters to operate at our expense, and equity and justice in our choices – are cultural issues, not technology or finance. It's about what we value, what future we want and what world we can imagine.

The creative and cultural community has become increasingly ambitious but it's important to make public connection and create the necessary conditions for better cultural governance. Cultural policy, with a few exceptions, has not paid attention to the encroaching climate crisis.

Climate action requires economies to move from extractive industries to regenerative ecological practices. Artists and cultural stewards should take creative purpose as a responsibility and inspiration to do good for the planet.

Climate talks have not been successful and global warming has passed the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold to 2.4 degrees, causing catastrophic loss for vulnerable communities and nature.

In spite of the [Paris Agreement](#)¹, requirements for climate action are still rare in the national cultural policy. Cultural voices are the missing link in climate negotiations. Artists, activists, organisations and networks are deeply connected to environmental issues. This will bring many perspectives, voices and ideas.

Cities, local authorities, activists, grassroots pioneers and artists embedded in their communities must inform the national cultural policy. They must collaborate globally to ensure that the best ideas and solution can be adopted at scale. Collective and fair targets and frameworks must align with the science and aim for regenerative creative ecologies. This requires strategies built on hyper-local and sector-specific expertise.

Julie's Bicycle has partnered with the British Council for [The Climate Connection](#) programme and ran roundtables in Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, Colombia and Italy to present a [call to action](#)

¹ The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change to limit global warming to preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.

to [COP26](#)². It urged cultural ministers at national levels to meet the climate challenge head on with governance and policy that support climate action.

Traditional craft and knowledge hold the key to sustainable architecture: Eleena Jamil

Eleena Jamil is the founder of her own practice, [EJ Architects](#), Malaysia. She has 15 years of experience in creating and building architecture by seeking special solutions with strong references to context and culture. Eleena spoke about the ethical position of architects and architecture in relation to climate change.

ASEAN countries are experiencing the immediate effects of climate change – extreme weather conditions like floods and prolonged dry spells. This has impacted cultural and creative industries as climate disruptions impact economic opportunities, affecting the lives of local communities.

Climate change can also lead to rapid loss of culturally valued ecosystems and landscapes which influence human culture. This will significantly impact cultural identity and social stability.

Architecture can act as an agency to raise awareness and introduce new and revitalise old practices. However, it is important to get the building and construction industry right first.

Buildings contribute to nearly 40% of the world's carbon emission. Architects and the construction industry can build sustainably by learning from the past to apply local craft and old practices to contemporary work. This would help them tackle the problem of climate change in this part of the world.

High levels of craftsmanship of the old ways were based on the deep knowledge of natural, local materials, as well as the local climate. There's also a conscious attempt to relate to the occupants and their everyday life, including their beliefs and rituals.

² COP26 was the 2021 United Nations climate change conference.



Image taken from Eleena Jamil's presentation showing some of EJ Architects' projects that used sustainable local materials.

The idea of architecture that is sympathetic to the local environment, people and culture is diminishing quickly as the economy becomes more developed and industry becomes obsessed with building more efficiently. Modernisation and standardisation rely heavily on non-renewable materials like steel and glass to build quickly at massive scales.

There is urgency to reconnect or reacquaint with past techniques, crafts, and culture as they contain a wealth of resources that could help us tackle the current crisis.

Besides working with local, renewable materials like bamboo, timber and hemp, the sector can develop new technologies around plants and soil. It can also tap into the skills of crafts people

and artisans so that ideas can be handed down from one experienced person to another, and from one generation to another.

Climate change is bringing up many conversations relating to place, context and culture. Architectural schools in the region can play a role in teaching traditional architecture. Up to a decade ago, architectural education was focused on using standard modern materials which were foreign to the craft and culture here.

We need to shift from this as South East Asia has plenty of natural resources, and a wealth of crafts and skills that can be applied to contemporary architecture. There is also the opportunity to create a unique identity for places here because present architecture and design tend to look like that of other cities around the world.

Build connections in climate change through arts and cultural initiatives: Rosanna Lewis

Rosanna is Senior Programme Manager, Culture and Development, British Council. She spoke about British Council's global activities related to COP26, and the organisation's [17 Creative Commissions](#) that explored climate change through art, science and digital technology with collaborators from 33 countries.

Although the British Council is not a climate change organisation, it recognises the global relevance of climate change to people in the countries it operates in. Hence, it views climate change as a cultural and human issue, not just a scientific or policy-based one.

While the British Council is a global organisation, its work is rooted in that local context. It talks and listens to people on the ground to find out what they want to address through their art and creative actions.

Creative Commissions works with cross-disciplines to address climate themes and rally global collaboration towards climate action. A few of its projects in South East Asia are:

- [Nine Earths](#), a collaborative project in Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil, Lebanon and the UK. It translated scientific data shared by climate scientists and activists into human stories to build empathy, inspire action and change attitudes.
- [10 Years to Save the World](#), which connected artists in the UK and the Philippines to develop a comic art anthology. It viewed climate change challenges through a humorous lens to challenge perceptions and inspire action.
- [Awareness, Resilience and Collaboration \(ARC\) Challenge Malaysia Grant](#) that provided grants to innovative UK-Malaysia responses to the climate challenge.



Clockwise: Rosanna Lewis, Dr Milena Dragicevic Secic, David Finnigan, Shaq Koyok, Eleena Jamil, Alison Tickle

Panel: The voices of artists

Indigenous culture is the best way to start climate conversations: Shaq Koyok

Shaq is a contemporary artist of the Temuan indigenous tribe from Selangor, Malaysia. His work captures the tension between the traditional sustainable way of life of his people, and modern consumerism. His art reflects his people, the rainforest he grew up in, and the importance of nature to Orang Asal (Original People).



Image: Screenshot from event recording

When he was a child, land developers encroached the jungle around Shaq's village. This led him to fight for his people's land rights through his art. He uses various mediums from contemporary painting to installation art.

Shaq's work claims the endangered cultural rights of tribal communities, who are victims of development.

In school, his minority culture wasn't represented in lessons. Through his work, he wants to show how indigenous people live with nature, which is an integral part of their lives. To his community, protecting nature from destruction is their duty as human beings of this planet.

He also pointed out that indigenous people in Malaysia are the same as other indigenous people around the world – they have similar understanding about nature. This shared value makes indigenous culture the best way to start climate conversations.

David Finnigan

[David](#) is a British-Australian writer and theatre-maker raised in Ngunnawal country, Australia.



He collaborates with researchers and climate scientists for his work on climate and global change.

[Get the Kids and Run](#) was an interactive work created with scientists at the [Earth Observatory Singapore](#) to help communities deal with the impact of typhoons and volcanoes.

Image: [David Finnigan: Get The Kids And Run \(davidfinig.com\)](#)

Climate change features greatly in David's work because of his personal experience. Fires are common in Australia, but their frequency and intensity have escalated in the last few years due to climate change. In 2020, his home country was hit by the biggest fires in recorded history. Family and friends had to flee and seek shelter elsewhere.

David views climate as an era, not an issue. It's the backdrop to every other issue. From something that people talked about 30 years ago, it has become the context or background of everything else that happens.

Other struggles, battles and challenges are exacerbated and accelerated by climate change. It's something that the current generation was born into and will die in, and it will still be around for future generations.

He doesn't use the word 'climate change' when engaging with South East Asia as he senses that artists and activists here are not talking about climate in the big world context. They're fighting specific battles, like land and cultural rights.

Watch the video recording [here](#).