

Partner South East Asia

Arts and culture matters opening session

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- **The opening session of Partner South East Asia featured a panel discussion with artists, academics and creative leaders from the UK and South East Asia. They talked about international collaboration and their experience in the arts. They also discussed ways of building sustainable creative industries.¹**
- **Around 30 per cent of South East Asia's creative sector is made up of non-formal groups or collectives.**
- **Access to government grants, subsidies and incentives, creative-friendly policies and processes, private patronage and funding from international organisations contribute to successful and sustainable organisations**
- **Resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness characterise CCI organisations and the creative sector in South East Asia.**
- **Collaboration brings innovation and new ways of thinking and doing. Engaging communities will bring the best results.**
- **While addressing digital inequality, we must respect cultural diversity and be mindful not to apply a single digital aesthetic across the board.**

¹ Partner South East Asia: Arts and Culture Matters, is a series of online forums curated by the British Council. It ran from 22 to 25 November 2021. The event aimed to strengthen cultural ties between South East Asia and the UK.

Overview

Partner South East Asia was a four-day virtual event that connected UK arts and cultural practitioners with their counterparts from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

The event featured 70 speakers and covered:

- six country briefings
- three thematic sessions
- a live networking session



Opening remarks: Caroline Meaby

British Council's Director Network Arts, Caroline Meaby shared that [British Council Arts](#) uses arts to find new ways of connecting and understanding each other. It wants to develop stronger creative sectors around the world.



Keynote speaker: Duong Bích Hạnh

Duong Bích Hạnh is Programme Specialist and Chief Culture Unit at the UNESCO Bangkok office, covering the Mekong cluster. Hanh presented a recent publication titled [Backstage: Managing Creativity and the Arts in South East Asia](#). It drew on the findings of a 2019 UNESCO Bangkok study of the creative sector in South East Asia, which was set within the framework of the [2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#)²

² This convention formally recognises the dual nature, both cultural and economic, of contemporary cultural expressions produced by artists and cultural professionals. It shapes the design and implementation of policies and measures that support the creation, production, distribution of and access to cultural goods and services

The study surveyed 329 participants from nine countries. The biggest group (22 per cent) considered themselves as multi-disciplinary. Around 30 per cent identified themselves as non-formal groups or collectives. Finance-wise, almost half of them operated with a budget of less than US\$10,000 per year. A third had a deficit in the last three years.

The study found four main factors that enable some CCI organisations to be more successful and sustainable than others:

- Government grants, subsidies and incentives
- Private patronage
- Funding from international organisations
- Resilience, adaptability and resourcefulness of creative and cultural workers

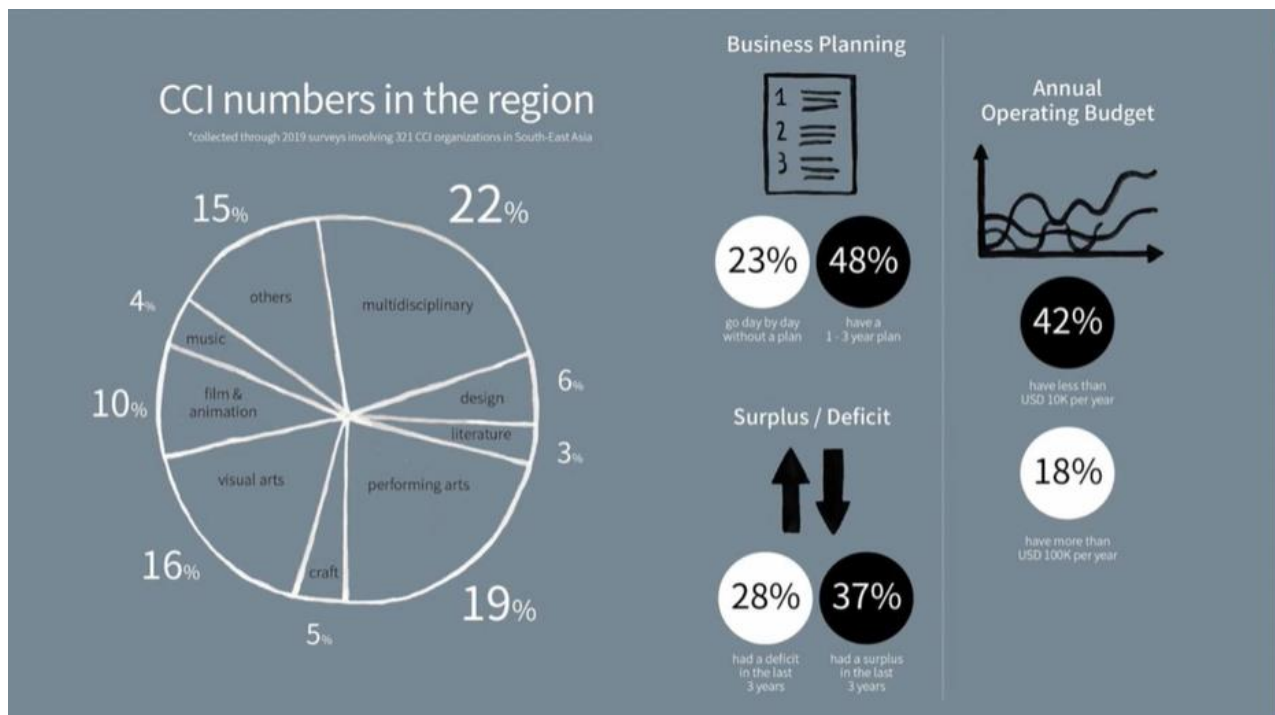


Image taken from Duong Bích Hạnh's presentation and shows Cultural and Creative Industry (CCI) numbers in South East Asia

The main obstacles to the operations and sustainability of CCI organisations are:

- Bureaucratic government processes
- Difficult access to grants and funds, and the information on them
- Underdeveloped corporate and individual philanthropic support for culture
- Lack of strategic business planning skills and market awareness
- Heavy reliance on part-time or project-based workers

- The organisation's activities are often subsidised through the free labour and low wages of cultural workers
- Competition for talent with other sectors such as hospitality and tourism that offer more sustainable and higher income.



Singapore has the most extensive government-funded support for CCI organisations. Over 20 years of state support has brought professionalism to the sector and cultivated a local audience.



The Thai government's promotion of the craft sector has enhanced the country's global reputation for high quality traditional crafts.



Indonesia has introduced tax exemption for CCI organisations.

Funding for CCI remains a challenge in low- and medium-income countries with other more urgent needs. Although arts funding by international organisations and diplomatic agencies is available, small and informal setups are not able to take advantage of this. The reasons are complicated, bureaucratic or costly registration processes.

On a positive note, the entrepreneurial spirit, resourcefulness and resilience of founders and members sustain organisations. The community network also contributes their skill sets or knowledge to keep organisations running. Another way for organisations to survive is to diversify CCI cultural goods and services, future audiences, funding sources and leadership structures or governing boards.

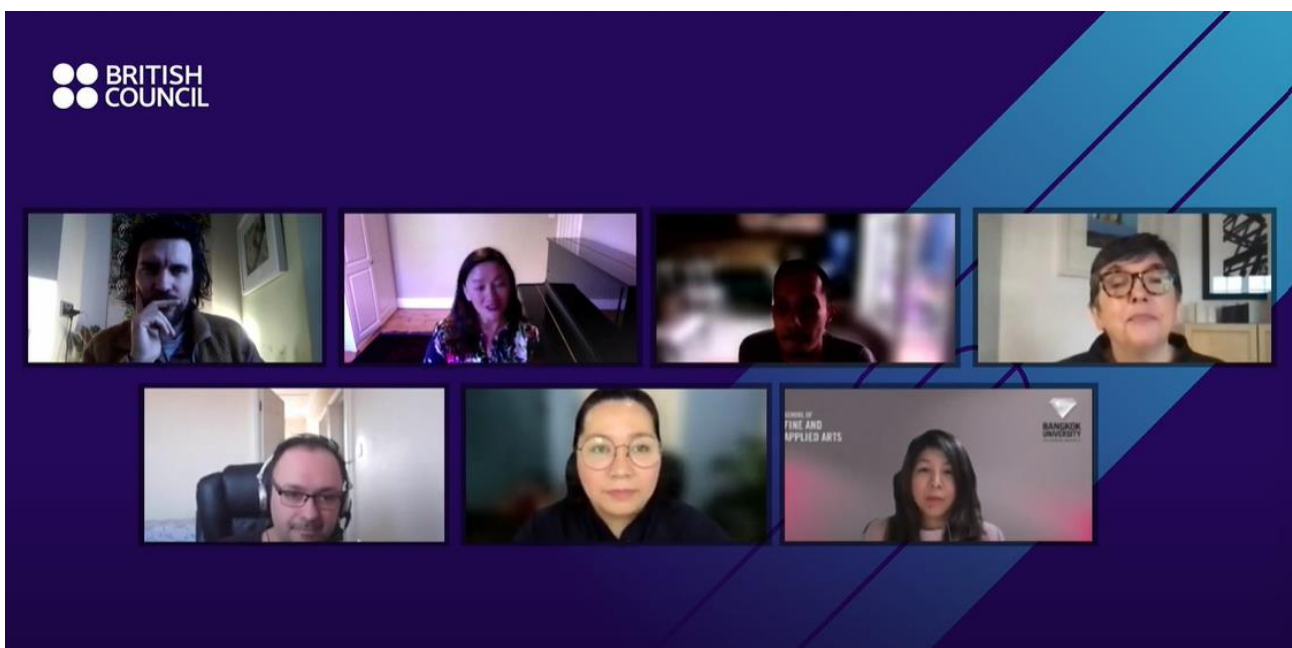
The study made five recommendations to further strengthen the CCI ecosystem:

1. Develop enabling strategies, action plans, policies and data collection mechanisms
2. Strengthen local governance and community participation
3. Implement new organisation models
4. Strengthen collaboration across the region
5. Integrate culture into sustainable development frameworks

Hanh provided several suggestions to deepen creative collaborations between the region and the UK:

- Co-learning to develop the skills of artists and creative cultural workers
- Activities that contribute to audience development
- Collaborations in smaller cities and rural areas for a more inclusive development and to reduce the rural-urban divide

Panel discussion



Clockwise: Ben Eaton, Angela Chan, Farid Rakun, Carol Sinclair, Khemmiga Teerapong, Baby Ruth Villarama, Tarek Virani

Unlocking the potential of creative businesses: Angela Chan

The panel discussion was moderated by Angela, Head of Inclusion at [StoryFutures](#), an immersive storytelling centre in Royal Holloway, University of London. She sits on the British Council's [Arts and Creative Economy Advisory Group](#).

Among the topics discussed and questions Angela posed to the panel were:

- Why collaborate?
- The digital shift and digital inequality
- How has international collaboration changed over the past two years?

Collective collaboration: Farid Rakun

Farid is part of the visual arts collective [Ruangrupa](#) in Indonesia. His take on collaboration is that it comes naturally in Indonesia as the collective is a popular form of doing artistic, cultural and creative works. He added that the challenges of collaborations have sharpened sensibilities, with the Covid-19 pandemic serving as a wake-up call.

Involving the community for better results: Carol Sinclair

Carol is Project Manager with [Applied Arts Scotland](#). She supports the creative and professional development of makers and artisans through [Crafting Futures: Thailand](#)³.

Carol noted that collaboration is a two-way process, and it brings innovation and new ways of thinking and doing. She gave an example of their work with basketmaking communities in Southern Thailand.

There was no market for traditional products, so the organisation collaborated with Thai designers to reinterpret them for the contemporary society. This increased sales and helped the community to build sustainable livelihoods while celebrating their identity.

Anchoring the creative global ecosystem through creative hubs: Tarek Virani

Tarek is Associate Professor of Creative Industries at University of West England, UK. He has worked with the British Council on projects such as resilience workshops and the creative hubs toolkit.

Creative hubs are vital as anchors of the global creative ecosystem. They ground the fluid sector that fluctuates between different types of organisational setups, like freelancers, company owners and service providers.

³ Crafting Futures is a global programme run by the British Council to strengthen the craft sector around the globe and reduce social and economic inequality. Crafting Futures: Thailand engages Thai artisans through capacity building programmes, with women artisans as the main beneficiaries.

The ripple effect of collaboration: Khemmiga Teerapong

Khemmiga is Assistant Professor at Bangkok University, Thailand. She is currently researching areas like participatory design and the creative economy.

Collaboration is often seen as individuals such as artists, craft makers and designers supporting each other, and sharing techniques and materials. However, her studies revealed that collaboration has a wider beneficial effect that spreads to communities, organisations and countries.

Rethinking time and space: Ben Eaton

Ben is a digital artist and Technical Director of [Invisible Flock](#), an interactive arts studio based at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in North England. He is currently in residence at Wellcome Trust in Central London.

In the last two years, the pandemic has sparked new relationships with people they've never met in person. It has made people think differently about time and space. They've developed better literacy in communicating and working remotely.

They've also discovered tools to create lasting outcomes beyond the natural parameters of time and physical presence. They're running different projects simultaneously in multiple locations or having them entirely online.

Expanding the network: Baby Ruth Villarama

Baby Ruth is a filmmaker and co-founder of [Voyage Studios](#), a group of independent storytellers in Manila that supports Filipino and Asian voices. She has been working with the British Council on stories about climate change since 2008.

The pandemic has changed the way her production company works. From the physical nature of making films, they're now collaborating with filmmakers they haven't met. They've also expanded their network beyond the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, working with filmmakers from India, the Middle East and Indonesia.

Collaboration in the digital era

Carol spoke about developing a digital version of a [craft toolkit](#)⁴ for in-person workshops. The toolkit is being translated from Thai and English into Indonesian and Malay.

Tarek shared about a project in China where the craft makers used cameras to show potential buyers in real time the making of their products. He saw this idea as a collective way of approaching the audience to show individual skills.

A few panel members brought up challenges of the digital shift. For Baby Ruth, it is impact distribution⁵ for her organisation's film work. They now set short-, medium- and long-term goals to ensure that the voices of the people they represent reach their target audience.

Tarek mentioned that the digital haves and have-nots, and the urban-rural divide, are found not just in South East Asia, but also in the UK due to infrastructure issues. In many parts of the world, it is also expensive to get online. This adds to operational costs.

Amid inequalities rising from the digital shift, Khemmiga shared how younger people are influencing the older generation to become digital artists. They're learning how to use social media, create content and take photographs to show their works online.

Ben touched on emerging digital cultures and digital diversity. He cautioned against applying a single digital aesthetic across different cultures.

⁴ The Digital Craft Toolkit is part of the British Council's Crafting Futures project, helping to expand crafting business learning opportunities for artists, designers and entrepreneurs through online platforms. Its courses cover lessons such as setting business goals, business planning, creating design concepts, developing products, sales and marketing, as well as budget management.

⁵ Impact distribution is getting the film to be seen as widely as possible by the right people to achieve the desired results.

Collaborating with the British Council

Wrapping up the discussion, Angela asked the panel members to share their experience working with the British Council. Tarek likened the organisation to a hub with important connections and networks.

For Carol, this collaboration is an efficient way of working. Besides benefiting from their knowledge and expertise, they're helping her organisation to get to the heart of the community that it wants to reach.

Baby Ruth credited the British Council for helping her organisation find a new audience in the educational sector. As physical documentary festivals were not possible during the pandemic, the British Council's network connected their documentaries to the educational sector. Documentaries are now part of the curriculum in the Philippines.



Closing remarks: Hugh Moffatt

Hugh is Country Director Indonesia and South East Asia Cluster Lead at the British Council.

He framed the panel's discussion within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting Hanh's point that 'we cannot do it alone'.

The creative economy and tourism will help rebuild the economy. The challenge is to get the voice of organisations that work on social, environmental and creative areas heard and recognised within the context of business and economy.

Watch the recording of the panel discussion [here](#).