

Partner South East Asia

Arts and culture matters: Executive summary

Report: March 2022

Introduction

Partner South East Asia: Arts and Culture Matters was a four-day series of online forums that took place in November 2021. It connected with over five hundred arts and cultural practitioners from the UK and counterparts from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Thailand and Việt Nam to strengthen cultural ties between South East Asia and the UK.

South East Asia's creative landscapes and networks

Around 30 per cent of South East Asia's creative sector consists of non-formal groups or collectives. This makes networks extremely important. Besides helping them to access support and funding, they're valuable in helping the cultural and creative industry sustain itself.

The creative sector's contribution to the economic sector can help countries rebuild economies ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, bureaucratic government processes remain a major obstacle to the operations and sustainability of creative and cultural organisations.

Some countries have more support than others. In Malaysia, the [Ministry of Communications and Multimedia](#) funds the [Cultural Economy Development Agency \(CENDANA\)](#). It acts as a connector between creators, regulating bodies, private investors or businesses, policymakers and consumers.

In Thailand, the [Ministry of Culture](#) creates commercial value for the country's cultural products. The [Creative Economy Agency \(CEA\)](#) develops and promotes creative people, creative businesses, and creative districts to improve Thailand's creative economy in general. The [Thailand Creative District Network](#) helps creative industries and workers expand in their provinces and nurture their districts.

In the Philippines, legislations such as the Creative Industries Act of 2021, is being pushed to help develop and promote the creative economy. The bill also aims to provide job opportunities and incentives to encourage and sustain entrepreneurship and the arts.

Myanmar's arts and culture ecosystem is unique because it doesn't receive support from the state. This also means that Western styles of art or working with the arts cannot be taken wholly and applied here. It is also worth noting that except for crafts, the other categories of arts (visual arts, performing arts and creative writing) are largely urban-centric.

Getting involved in policymaking

The creative sector must inform national arts and culture policies to effect systemic change. Arts practitioners in Indonesia formed [Koalisi Seni](#) to voice the sector's concerns through policy advocacy.

It was actively involved in the formulation of the [Law on the Advancement of Culture](#) that mandated the establishment of the [Cultural Endowment Fund](#). It also consulted on the [Law of Creative Economy](#) that mandates the development of a sustainable creative ecosystem and sees the creative sector as a potential source of GDP.

In Việt Nam, the British Council partnered with the [Vietnam National Institute of Arts and Culture Studies](#) for the [Cultural and Creative Hubs Vietnam project](#) targeting six key cultural and creative hubs. It works with central and provincial governments to support the development and implementation of strategies and policies for the cultural and creative ecosystem at local and national levels.

The British Council also collaborated with UNESCO and UK experts to assist the Vietnamese government with the drafting of the [National Strategy for the Development of Vietnamese Cultural Industries to 2020, with a Vision to 2030](#).¹

¹ The Strategy put forward specific measures on state management mechanism, human resources training, resources mobilisation, social awareness raising, market development and enhancing international integration in cultural industries.

Inclusive and diverse voices in the arts

Creative networks need to think about who's not in the room or part of the conversation as the arts thrives on diversity. Arts offers everyone huge benefits, but some groups are excluded, like ethnic minorities, the disabled people, women, the LGBT community and people in rural areas. The transformative potential of the arts and creative industries has shifted narratives of artistic expression, challenging gender stereotypes, gender binary norms and taboos.

In Myanmar, women artists are telling their own stories that was not possible before the country opened up to creativity and freedom of expression in 2011. Emerging female photographs especially, are documenting people's lives, as well as stories that matter to them individually.

In the Philippines, the '[Kamustahan Arts Projects](#)' (Catching up), bring together Filipino migrant workers, artists, family members, academia and activists across the diaspora.

Inclusivity is not limited to ensuring that anyone can take part in creative activities as artists and audiences. It's also about representation in important conversations such as climate change. Cultural voices are the missing link in climate negotiations. Climate change must be addressed as a cultural and human issue, not just a scientific or policy-based one.

New technology and the digital economy

Women artists in Myanmar who face government and societal restrictions and are side-lined by male dominance in gatekeeper roles, such as publishers, curators and gallery owners. The rise of social media offers opportunities for women to bypass those gatekeepers and take charge of their own expression.

Artists must move from the traditional way of doing arts and embrace digital platforms like non-fungible tokens (NFT) to build new revenue opportunities.

In Thailand, social enterprise Hear & Found worked with 30 Indigenous musicians to build their music and story archive and connect them to audiences and media creator worldwide. The musicians earn income from music licensing as copyright owners of their online stock music.

Governments are pushing the creative sector as a key contributor to the economy. In Malaysia, creative industries are parked under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia to drive the digital economy. The ministry set up the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) to accelerate digital economy growth so that it contributes almost 20% to the country's GDP.

In Thailand, there's a push for creative industries to be the engine of Thailand's 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan. Part of CEA's mission is to develop the digital economy like blockchain and NFT.

In the Philippines, the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions (CITEM) has established a number of websites to promote exchange with different countries for creative sectors.

In conclusion, the Partner South East Asia event highlighted that arts and culture matters for the people, economy, and the world's sustainability and future.

What next?

The British Council is committed to building connections, deepening relations and sharing insights between artists and cultural practitioners from across the UK and South East Asia. Throughout 2022 and 2023, we will be delivering a variety of programmes, events and campaigns, both online and offline. Please join us.

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