

Critical Reflection

Following the KOFF Roundtable on Art and Peacebuilding

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Art Initiatives in Fragile and Conflict Affected Regions

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Introduction

Art initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected contexts receive growing attention. A broad spectrum of strategies has evolved, integrating perspectives, concepts and skills from different fields such as artistic production, international cooperation, cultural management and humanitarian work. Both during latent or violent conflict, as well as in post-conflict situations, individual artists, civil society activists and grassroots movements, international NGOs and governmental actors have gained experience with good practices and unsuccessful approaches.

The KOFF roundtable aimed at sharing these experiences in order to discuss and critically reflect on the potentials and challenges of art initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected regions. This critical reflection provides a synthesis of the discussions and further reflects on possible ways forward.

Before exploring the potential and the challenges of art initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected regions, it is helpful to look at the meaning and understanding of art that inform the discussions and which are relevant

when looking at the linkages between art and peacebuilding: Dagmar Reichert from artasfoundation and speaker at the KOFF roundtable describes the meaning of art as an invitation to look at and relate to the world in a special way. In everyday life, we often act on the basis of a functional attitude. We strive to use resources, in particular our time resources, efficiently, and to act providently. Only in special moments we allow ourselves to enter into a space for the assumption of plenitude, where foresight can be put aside and we can experiment with possibilities. It is the space of laughter, of hospitality, of experiencing beauty. It is a space that opens up when we start relating to the world in a way that philosophy describes as aesthetic relationship. Art could, thus, be described as actions or artefacts, which invite us to shift to such an aesthetic perspective; actions or artefacts that sometimes even cannot make sense, unless we view them aesthetically. In that sense, art is an unalienable part of positive peace, since it allows the creation and expression of human qualities beyond the mere existential needs.

An additional element of the meaning of art, especially relevant with regards to

peacebuilding, is to see art and the artistic process as an impulse for creative change. Maybe, one could even say, that art is the space one has to enter for any change to happen, including conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Vesna Matovic from international Alert and speaker at the KOFF roundtable suggests to analyze change induced by art initiatives at three different levels: individual, relational and social. This differentiation, as well as the conceptualization of art as space and process, will structure the following reflections on the potential and challenges of art initiatives in situations of fragility, conflict or chronic violence (1). These reflections are followed by some thoughts on a very fundamental question regarding the logic of art and peacebuilding (2), as well as an outlook into future needs and opportunities for exchange and learning among the different communities such as peacebuilding, arts, development and humanitarian aid (3).

1. [Potentials and challenges of art initiatives in peacebuilding](#)

Reflecting about the potentials and challenges of art initiatives, one might try to differentiate according to conflict phases, as in the table in the annex. Still, while pointing to the wide scope of art initiatives, such a division according to conflict phases is very rough, as rough as – this is well known – is the description of a society in all its sectors by means of a model. The following reflections, therefore, focus on some of the key potentials and challenges related to art in peacebuilding, according to the three levels of change they mainly initiate.

1.1 [Change at the individual level](#)

On the individual level, art initiatives might lead to cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral change: In relation to the cognitive aspect, art can open up new cognitive spaces and offer a permission to think differently or to reframe a situation. It can raise awareness and lead to a

change of perspective by confronting individuals with information discrepant or contradictory to their expressed views, attitudes or self-image. Meret Schlegel, artist and speaker at the KOFF roundtable, expresses this in the following words:

“Engaging in art initiatives in conflict regions also affects us as artists. It questions our self-image as artists and influences the work we are doing. Not only the work we are doing in conflict regions, but also our artistic work at home. I am not sure if it directly leads to individual or social change, but it surely raises our awareness”

With regards to the emotional aspect, art can reach to emotions that other approaches cannot or are not willing to deal with. It has therapeutic power as it helps to get in touch with emotional life, to express emotions and to initiate emotional catharsis. This seems especially relevant in situations of ongoing conflict and violence, as well as art therapy used in post-conflict phases in order to heal traumata and improve emotional wellbeing and stability.

Example: Pakistan – socially conscious theater



International Alert

A project that enhances community prevention mechanisms against sexual violence contains a street theater component. Men and women take part in a six-day training alongside actors on how to write, perform and produce theater plays for their communities. Stories are created of how to respond to sexual violence and

support survivors. This capacity building and awareness component sits alongside early-warning mechanisms, policy advocacy, and legal change.

Regarding behavioral change, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of modelling and imitation. Constructive feedback about performance, positive reinforcement and fostering self-efficacy, empowerment, responsibility and hope increases motivation for constructive action in the future and thus, facilitates behavioral change and capacity building. In that sense, art can have a preventive effect.

1.2 Change at the level of relationships

Psychodynamic theories of group change suggest that an essential ingredient of healing and reconciliation involve group processes of acknowledgement, mourning and forgiveness. Explicit acknowledgement and acceptance of moral responsibility for past events that victimized the other group, along with assurances that similar events will not happen in the future can activate a response of forgiveness. For many, art offers a way of leaving behind the status and self-perception of a victim, and actively regaining control and initiative over one's own life.

It is further recognized that sharing personal experiences or stories has the power to transform relationships between people. These stories serve to enhance empathy, promote perspective-taking and integrative complexity, and draw connections across racial and ethnic divisions. Many peacebuilding programs try to establish equal-status interaction between participants from different ethnic groups. Interventions in mixed-ethnic groups or among polarized political sides, which are organized around a social identity other than ethnicity or political affiliation, can highlight common identities that cut across ethnic or political lines.

It is important to note that the strong binding capacity of art, that is, its capacity to connect people in the first place, does not work via

unification and boundary-drawing. Art actually can serve as a counter-force to unification. Some works of art are able to speak to people over distances of centuries or culture and can give access to many different – but not arbitrary – interpretations. Their precise rhythm, so to say, can host and connect many individual rhythms in one. Rating the quality of artistic work is difficult, but one could argue that it has to do with this capacity of holding difference, of connecting people without reducing them to the same. Thus, one could say that even if power holders might try to use art for controlling in- and exclusion, striving for utmost quality would be the best way for art projects to protect themselves and contribute to inclusive and peaceful relations.

Thus, at the level of relational change, art has the power to contribute to healing and reconciliation, and to enhance interaction, communication and dialogue. Meret Schlegel further highlights the relevance and potential of art for communication, when trying to speak about the unspeakable or when another common language is lacking:

“Dance is communication, non-verbal and verbal, it is an entrance door to get into contact with people. Once I met a group of kids, they were fighting. I reacted to them with rhythmical movements. They copied the movements. Then they started to add their movements. When I met them later in a different place in town, they immediately started to communicate with me through their movements and dancing, as we did not have another common language.”

1.3 Social change

Last but not least, art can be linked to social change, which is the ultimate goal of many peacebuilding initiatives in general. It is, therefore, at the center of interest to understand how art initiatives contribute to social change in situations of fragility, conflict and chronic violence.

In a post-conflict phase, art is a way of creating, envisioning and discussing a possible

culture of peace that is understandable and accessible for more people than the often very technical, juridical and specialized language used in peace agreements. It is a way of expressing and transforming narratives of violence into new creative peaceful narratives – narratives of hope that allow for coexistence, as well as inclusive and peaceful negotiation of conflict.

The capacity to open up spaces for alternative narratives, for critical reflection and resistance to hegemonic discourses, also gains importance in a situation of latent or emerging conflict, as we might see with the rise of totalitarian regimes and the shrinking civil society space worldwide. Art can be a means of the marginalized and powerless to highlight structural inequalities, to make latent conflict visible and to challenge power and the status quo. If peacebuilding interventions do encourage artists to do so, they must, however, consider that these activities might have negative effects on the personal security of the artist and/or the members of the peacebuilding organizations on the ground. A discussion on potential risks and a risk mitigation plan is, therefore, indispensable.

Similar reflections hold true in relation to art's capacity to activate a public sphere and connect people, sometimes many people, for joint action. In this capacity, art may have a destabilizing effect and does not automatically lead to a constructive or peaceful development: Shared aesthetic tastes, or – on a more physical level – shared rhythms have a strong binding capacity, which can easily be (mis-)used by people in power, be it with "good" or "bad" intentions. From their controlling position – over the microphone or over marketing and media – they can charge this binding force with quality: with a sense of belonging that enables inner differences and openness towards others, or with a pressure towards unification and strict in-group vs. out-group boundaries, which ultimately means violence.

As in any intervention in situations of fragility, conflict or chronic violence, it is, therefore,

crucial for art initiatives as well, to do a sound conflict analysis that includes actors, their relations and power, conflict issues and dynamics, as well as connectors and dividers. Furthermore, it might be useful to combine art initiatives with other peacebuilding approaches such as dialogue or psycho-social support, in order to provide a frame that reduces the risk of unintended negative consequences and increases the potential of art initiatives to contribute to peace and social justice.

Example: Mano river peace and culture festival



International Alert

This was a series of three-day national festivals that aimed at rebuilding cultural unity through dance, poetry, music, theater and traditional arts. This work convened large numbers of people and saw different cultural and ethnic groups coming together to celebrate peace. Cultural festivities were interspersed with meetings and focused dialogues. The festivals that started in a small Liberian county, culminated in Monrovia drawing traditional artists from Sierra Leone and Guinea. They got attention from political parties and the government including the President.

2. Art and peacebuilding – the perfect match?

Art has, thus, the capacity to raise awareness, to address emotions and to promote behavioral change at the individual level. It can contribute to transforming relationships, to fostering reconciliation and communication, as well as to

connecting people in diversity at the level of relationships. Finally, art has the potential to create spaces for alternative narratives, critical reflection and resistance, as well as to mobilize people for joint action. With this potential to initiate or promote change processes at the three different levels, art can constitute a very innovative approach to peacebuilding. Art and peacebuilding might seem to be the perfect match.

There is, however, a fundamental challenge in relation to the so called “question of intentionality”. This question is of central importance to art, and via art initiatives it could also move into the focus of the general discourse on peacebuilding and development cooperation. Here, the term “intentional” is used to characterize a process, which starts from a defined state and is oriented towards a pre-given objective. It is a way of proceeding from a place one can identify, towards a result, which can be described beforehand and does not first have to arise out of the process itself.

In striving for precision and often also in proceeding quite systematically, artistic work is similar to such intentional work according to a given plan. But it differs fundamentally in its logic. Let's take a proto-typical example of an artistic process: It is organized in a way that is able lead to an outcome one did not know and could not foresee. As such, it is like other forms of research. But other than those research processes, which use creativity for problem solving, artistic creativity does not start out with a given problem. It rather begins from an observation, which attracts the personal interest of an artist, who then follows its different aspects or threads to see where they might lead. Hereby the infinity of possible paths is greatly reduced by the respective personalities of the artists and by certain frames or procedural rules they deliberately set for themselves. These frames, however, cannot be equated to the objective of a plan. When working according to a plan, the goal provides the direction. In artistic work, by contrast, the compass is a physical sensation, which stimulates the intellect. It is a feeling – not an emotion – of coherence and richness,

and of excitement, which art theory takes as the criterion for “aesthetic judgement”, a very subjective criterion, which nevertheless might be shared with others.

How can such a logic of artistic processes fit into the intentional processes of peacebuilding or development work, where a lot of effort is put into describing the problematic of a present situation and elaborating what better situations should be aimed at? Which even demand for themselves a theory of change to explicate why a certain strategy could be useful for leading from a problematic present to a better future – maybe even to explain why and how an art initiative might have the potential to contribute to this aim? Asked the other way round: Can art unfold its full potential for peacebuilding or social transformation if this is actually intended via an art project?

A provisional answer is this: Even though artistic processes cannot work according to a logic of intention, the aim of peacebuilding or social transformation can be built into the above mentioned frame, within which the artistic process can unfold. Such a frame might be given by the setting in which an art project takes place – e.g. a conflict-affected village – and/or by the personality and previous experience of an artist. Thereby, the role of the artist should be separated from the frame-setting role of a curator or an organization engaged in peacebuilding or development. It is the task of the curator or the organization to have a plan, to identify the context, to do a proper conflict analysis, to invite “appropriate” artists on the basis of their previous works, and to give them some basic orientation. Once that frame is set, the curator only interferes in the artistic process if the artists wish a partner for discussion, and otherwise holds the tension between the curatorial intentions implied in the frame, and the art process itself. In this way, they open a room for maneuver for unexpected, context specific possibilities.

This logic of art projects might actually be helpful for peacebuilding or development interventions in general. Here, where no recipes can be given and models cannot easily

be transferred from one context to another, this room for maneuver would mean limiting intentionality to the most general framework for action and holding open – in spite of institution's and donor's needs to plan and control – a safe space for experimenting and following even seemingly irrelevant observations, to see where they might lead; perhaps to peaceful social relations one could not think of before.

Example: Georgia “off/line” workshop



artasfoundation

“off/line” was a workshop of artists from Western Europe and from Georgia in Georgia, South Caucasus. In a village directly at the demarcation line to the breakaway region of South Ossetia, artists and residents discussed the question, what art can do in a situation of post-war rehabilitation and a frozen conflict, and they developed art works ranging from a film to wall painting and puppet theater.

3. Outlook and ways forward

In the academic sphere, a thorough understanding and continuous learning about the potentials, risks and challenges of art initiatives in situations of fragility, conflict and chronic violence requires an exchange and collaboration between experts from different

fields such as political science, social anthropology, international relations, peacebuilding and development theory, art theory and practice, etc. This need for inter- and transdisciplinary research methodology might be the reason why, in spite of the growing interest in art-based approaches, there is still too little research and literature about these issues.

There is, however, too little exchange between practitioners working with art in different regions of the world as well – and this could be improved in a much shorter time-span. The participants at the KOFF roundtable identified a need for joint analysis and reflection on the issues outlined above, as well as many others have not been touched upon yet. A regular exchange on experiences, successes and best practices, as well as glorious failures among peacebuilding and development practitioners, artists and art-educators could foster mutual learning and innovation. It is crucial to link these exchange and learning processes in Switzerland to concrete artistic production and art-based interventions on the ground. All the participants would therefore contribute with their concrete experience and projects in order to identify common interests, questions and issues for the exchange. In face of the difficulties of working across differences in power and influence in contexts affected by fragility, conflict or chronic violence, such a regular exchange could also help to create a sense of mutual support and motivation.

The exchange – even though informal and not funded – shall be characterized by regular attendance and high ownership of the interested core group. Concrete outputs, outcomes or even institutionalized projects arising from that exchange are an open possibility to be discussed among the core group participants. In a first place, this exchange would, however, be an open-ended undertaking, following the logic of an artistic process that brings about results that no one might have thought about before.

Annex: The potentials of art in different conflict phases

When conflict is latent or emergent, art initiatives can

- ask “hot questions”, raise awareness and make conflicts visible;
- bring people together for discussion and contribute to the activation of a public sphere;
- connect people to act together (in constructive or destructive ways!);
- create new links to isolated population groups or countries;
- give a voice or visibility to ignored minorities and marginalized groups;
- open a space for experimenting with new conceptions of self and other;
- offer a realm for (self-)expression, (self-)respect and dignity where economic perspectives are lacking;
- ...

When conflict is escalating, i.e. during direct violence, art initiatives can

- maintain and provide a space of “civilization” and discussion;
- constitute a safe space for expressing emotions and opinions
- provide a frame for expressing emotions and opinions in a safe way
- invite the “sovereignty of laughter” (relativizing the situation);
- ...

In post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and long-term peacebuilding art initiatives can

- demonstrate that life is returning in the direction of “normality”;
- create an occasion for diversion and joy;
- offer rituals for mourning;
- provide a space to share/hear different and conflicting (hi-)stories;
- give an impulse to leave a “victim” status behind and to take initiative;
- initiate group cooperation and reduce isolation;
- offer an occasion to collaborate for members of (formerly) opposing sides;
- provide form for expressing traumatic experiences (art therapy);
- lead to potential sources of small income;
- ...

[artasfoundation](#)

artasfoundation, the Swiss Foundation for Art in Regions of Conflict is an independent, impartial operational foundation. Funded by donations from many members of civil society, it was established in 2011. The foundation initiates art projects and accompanies their realization. It studies the contributions unrestricted art can offer to conflict mediation and the building of peace.

[International Alert](#)

International Alert has been working for 30 years with people directly affected by conflict to find peaceful solutions in over 30 countries and territories and with offices in 18 countries. International Alert believes in a world where people resolve their differences without violence and can build a more peaceful future for their families and communities. International Alert's mission is to build a more peaceful world by:

- Working with people directly affected by conflict to find peaceful solutions.
- Shaping policies and practices to support peace.
- Collaborating with all those striving for peace to strengthen collective voice and impact.

[swisspeace](#)

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It analyses the causes of violent conflicts and develops strategies for their peaceful transformation. swisspeace aims to contribute to the improvement of conflict prevention and conflict transformation by producing innovative research, shaping discourses on international peace policy, developing and applying new peacebuilding tools and methodologies, supporting and advising other peace actors, as well as providing and facilitating spaces for analysis, discussion, critical reflection and learning.

[Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding \(KOFF\)](#)

Founded in 2001, KOFF is a dialogue and exchange platform facilitated by swisspeace connecting Swiss state and non-state actors active in peacebuilding. Its mission is to ensure that Swiss peacebuilding activities are strengthened, relevant, and visible. To do so, KOFF facilitates dialogue and learning processes in Switzerland and abroad and fosters information sharing with a view to develop strategic alternatives, policy recommendations and joint initiatives for peace with its member organizations.

[Critical Reflections](#)

In its *critical reflection* series, swisspeace and guest speakers critically consider the topics addressed at KOFF roundtables with a view to summarizing the main arguments put forward and carrying on the discussion in order to encourage further debate.