

Arts and Conflict

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Speakers:

Cynthia Cohen

Director, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life, Brandeis University

Lena Slachmuis

Chief Programming Officer, Search for Common Ground

Moderator:

Sheldon Himelfarb

Director, Center of Innovation: Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding / Director, Center of Innovation: Science, Technology and Peacebuilding, United States Institute of Peace

Introduction to Arts and Conflict

A comparative study of arts and conflict reveals the various ways in which art can contribute to peacebuilding. The intersection of the two highlights the ability of art to promote reconciliation within societies marred by violence. From culturally adapted theater performances to norms focused television programming, the arts provide a dynamic set of tools to uproot structural violence and cultivate reconciliation. In order to address entrenched conflict, tools such as theater and film can penetrate superficial rhetoric to genuinely engage individuals and societies. In an effort to foster community-wide reconciliation, tools such as television and radio programming are used to create a neutral, non-threatening space for societies to address and heal the wounds of past atrocities. Artistic methods allow individuals and collectivities to reflect on and discuss the past and present through meta-cognitive awareness engendered by the art form. Arts-based approaches to peacebuilding create fertile ground for learning and creativity.

As the field of peacebuilding continues to explore the intersection between arts and conflict, various tools are gaining credibility as mediums of peace promotion.

Transforming Conflict: A Sampling of Approaches

Theater is one of the more common arts-based approaches to peacebuilding. It may be used to address a range of societal issues, from reconciling with the past, to dealing with ongoing dynamics such as land conflict. By unearthing experiences previously buried under social stigma, culturally sensitive theater is able to help individuals and societies come to grips with the past and address current challenges. In the aftermath of human rights violations, for instance, traditional rituals can be woven into theatrical works of high aesthetic quality to promote a culturally appropriate norm of rights respect.

Participatory theater is also used to contribute to peacebuilding efforts. By training communities to actively listen, the exercise fosters empathy and promotes a collaborative narrative through which to reflect on the past. Participatory theater also allows communities to evade violent confrontation while avoiding passive reactions. The Balkan Theater youth projects, for instance, engage youth as creators and leaders of outreach initiatives. The harmony provided by the performance enhances societal cohesion by addressing intergenerational tension and promoting society-wide reconciliation. Theater thus provides communities with the opportunity to honor the past without the risk of re-traumatization.

The power of theater as a tool for peace derives from the dedication of individuals who concentrate their energy into community reconciliation. The mythological, spiritual, and historical residences evoked by settings and costumes further engage the audience by issuing invitations to the audience to assume full agency.

Television and radio programming are additional tools used to foster social reconciliation and manage conflict. By capitalizing on the ability of media to shift cultural norms and depict fully rounded characterization of the 'other,' television programming can introduce symbols and metaphors to enable mentality shifts. For instance, *The Team*, a television series designed to prevent conflict and promote tolerance, is used in Nepal by Search for Common Ground to encourage gender equality. By placing women in positions of leadership, *The Team* catalyzes a norm shift in the population of young people who are introduced to the idea of women in leadership from a young age.

Challenges and Limitations

The integration of the arts into the field of peacebuilding faces many challenges. Scarce funding marginalizes the arts in favor of approaches that can be more concretely implemented and evaluated. In addition, perceptions of artists as uncontrollable, subversive members of society foster attitudes of distrust and disinterest by governments and local communities. At a more basic level, however, peacebuilders may simply not know where to find and connect with artists. Moreover, in practice, the implementation and proliferation of the arts-based approach is hindered by limited access to media outlets, a mistrust of information sources, manipulation of the media, and engrained stereotypes that prevent effective norm transformation.

Conclusions

The unique ability of the arts to create space for meaningful expression and transformation ensures the continued development of the arts-based approach. Paradoxically, the challenges inherent in mainstreaming an approach built upon intangible measurements of attitudes inhibit its widespread proliferation. Therefore, while the arts provide tools to cultivate peacebuilding, the implementation of those tools is contingent upon the embrace of the next generation of peacebuilders and additional support from the international community.