

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



Institute for Culture
and Society

MEDIA, ART AND STORIES:

**A CASE FOR FUNDING RESEARCH INTO
COMMUNITY-BASED CREATIVE ARTS
PRACTICES IN WESTERN SYDNEY**

ADVOCACY BRIEF

Valentina Baú and Nichole Georgeou



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that its campuses occupy their traditional lands, Western Sydney University acknowledges the Darug, Eora, Dharawal (also referred to as Tharawal) and Wiradjuri peoples and thanks them for their support of its work in their lands (Western Sydney and beyond).

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The Development Studies Association of Australia (DSAA) represents researchers, scholars and practitioners engaged in research, teaching, and training in the field of development studies. The purpose of the DSAA is to promote critical inquiry, reflection, research, teaching and the value of Development Studies in Australia. Operating across the Higher Education and the professional Development sectors, DSAA's *Creative Approaches and Practices in Development Studies* Thematic Group integrates and shares knowledge of creative methods of engagement along with communities, while documenting best practices. The group, convened by Dr Valentina Baú and comprising Associate Professor Nichole Georgeou, works both with fellow academics and with international and local development professionals and activists with an interest in designing socially-engaged initiatives. The aim is to develop and apply strategies inspired by collaborative co-production and expression of creative agency and cultural justice in policy-making and engagement.



RESEARCH TEAM



VALENTINA BAÚ

Dr. Valentina Baú works as a Senior Research Fellow at Western Sydney University, Institute for Culture and Society. Both as a practitioner and as a researcher, her work has focused on the use of the media and communication in international development. She has completed a PhD on the role of participatory media in conflict transformation and reconciliation after civil violence at Macquarie University (Australia), and a MSc in Communication for Development at the University of Reading (UK). Her present research explores different theoretical frameworks and practical applications in the area of Communication for Development in Peacebuilding. Valentina has collaborated with international NGOs, the United Nations and the Italian Development Cooperation, and worked across Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Her experience involves the implementation of both research and media projects with victims and perpetrators of conflict, displaced people, refugees and people living in extreme poverty. Her work is published on established academic journals as well as renowned online platforms. Valentina is the recipient of an Australia Research Council DECRA Fellowship (2021-2024) for her project on *Development Communication, Media and Peace in Protracted Displacement*.



NICHOLE GEORGEOU

Associate Professor Nichole Georgeou is the Director of the Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI) at Western Sydney University, and Research Theme Champion of Urban Living Futures and Society. She is currently serving as Associate Dean, International in the School of Social Sciences. Nichole holds a PhD in Development Sociology, a Master of Social Change and Development (Research) and a Bachelor of Creative Arts from University of Wollongong, as well as a Diploma of Education from University of Newcastle.

Nichole's research crosses three main areas: (1) international development volunteering; (2) gender and human security; and (3) Pacific Islands food security. Her expertise in development volunteering was internationally recognised when she was invited to the United Nations Volunteers Headquarters (Bonn Germany) in July 2015 to develop a vision and strategic global research agenda on 'volunteering for sustainable development'. Nichole undertakes regular research consultancies in the Greater Western Sydney area, including for the Community Migrant Resource Centre (CMRC). She brings her strong background in the social sciences to focus on the effects of social adaptation in cities as we attempt to move to a just transition from fossil fuels to a sustainable economy.

FOREWORD



It was a bright Saturday morning and the Cabramatta classroom was brimming with families. We were at a community screening of digital stories created by young people from the Khmer community. There was a story about the love shared by best friends and one about another love, but this time for basketball. These two stories were in English, and a bit of Khmer, and were full of new images - photos and videos - which the young people had learned to capture and edit in the six weeks of digital filmmaking workshops, alongside basic script writing and audio recording.

We were now watching a story about migration, with photos of the young storyteller's parents from their time in Cambodia. The boy spoke of their arrival in Sydney, knowing no English but determined to make a new, loving home, and grateful for every opportunity that came their way. He beamed about his parents, their courage, determination and their love.

He described how family and respecting his elders are an important part of being Khmer. "I am proud to be Khmer," he proclaimed in the film, "and my parents' bravery is part of me." The audience smiled, nodded enthusiastically, and clapped loudly. It was at this point that the father, his eyes shiny with tears, stood up and embraced his son. Together they talked

about how the project had prompted the father to take out their old photo album and share stories never told before. The project opened up a space for the family's own storytelling to happen, and unlocked memories and emotions that, up to that point, it was never the right time (or easy enough) to express.

My heart swells with emotion just thinking about that day, fifteen years ago.

Every artist and practitioner of community arts and cultural development has a treasure chest of similar accounts. Stories of how arts and creativity brought someone home to themselves; offered a safe space towards self-acceptance and knowing; forged friendships founded on shared experiences; moved audiences to tears; and transformed someone's life. Yet, despite the heart and the potential of these accounts, they are still about one person - or one family - and how these were affected by one artwork. Meanwhile, the measures of success (and funding) for community-based creative arts initiatives demand bigger numbers - quantities! - or other ways to prove the wider impact in domains like employability, health or social bridging capital.

It is here that partnerships with research bodies are so important to the community-based creative arts sector. Research partners bring a vital skill set to a project, providing tools and capacity building in impact measurement. Their early engagement and identification of the outcomes that the community and partners seek to achieve can also help to shape the project with evaluation mechanisms built in.

What I am pleased to see in this advocacy brief is the recognition that good community-based arts initiatives are never 'plonked' onto a community. A beneficial arts project - and equally useful research - requires that the partners have an existing relationship with the community, or at least intersecting networks, upon which trust is established and from which a safe space for sharing experiences and knowledge can genuinely emerge. Another important distinction in this advocacy brief is that of communities being co-producers and co-researchers, rather than the passive subjects of a top-down project design and research agenda.

Western Sydney is rich with small-to-medium arts companies and engaged local councils whose work is grounded in the communities they serve. Community arts and cultural development has been practiced in Western Sydney, particularly with diverse cultural communities and young people, for decades.



Empowering these diverse communities by committing to people having agency of their own stories, is arguably what makes Western Sydney so rich with artists and storytellers and overflowing with the authentic expression of a country, and a world that is rapidly changing.

For communities of colour in Western Sydney, art and creative expression are inseparable from culture and from life. It is through these that migrants and refugees walk, dance and sing alongside the First Nations custodians of the lands and waters of Western Sydney.

And as we, Western Sydney arts organisations, community services, local councils, settlement services, and peak bodies continue to raise our voices for equitable arts funding for the region, this advocacy brief asks that we include research funds.

This will be key to ensuring that our community arts and cultural development projects pointedly deliver the outcomes that are most beneficial to our communities, and that these are communicated to key decision makers in a way that is relevant and enriching.

TIFFANY LEE-SHOY

Tiffany has worked as a cultural strategist and served on the boards of arts organisations in Western Sydney for over 20 years. She is currently employed at Penrith City Council.



BACKGROUND

THIS PROJECT

Media, Art and Stories: A sector-wide consultation on research and practice in community development with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups in Western Sydney was an initiative designed by Western Sydney University researchers to deepen understanding and enhance engagement between the University and creative arts organisations in Western Sydney. Three consultation events were held in May, July and September 2022. These brought together a range of stakeholders involved in community-based creative arts practices to examine the following topics:

- How research could be utilised within community-based organisations working with media, art and stories (creative arts practices);
- The research wants and needs of these organisations;
- How organisations could engage with research institutions such as universities to conduct rigorous research on the impact of their work on CALD communities, and which approaches and processes would be most useful.

Participating organisations included: Burwood Council, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Canterbury Bankstown Council, CuriousWorks, Georges River Council, Fairfield City Council, Liverpool City Council, MECA (Mount Druitt Ethnic Community Agency), MLC Gallery & Studio, Outloud, PYT Fairfield, Settlement Services International, Waverley Council, Western Sydney Community Forum, WestWords.

SCOPE OF 'CREATIVE ARTS PRACTICE'

In the context of this advocacy brief, 'creative arts practice' refers to the organised creative and artistic activities that are driven or led by the community-based organisations participating in this project – including film-making, theatre, dance, and creative writing. As a broad term, it does not intend to encompass the other diverse outputs of artistic expression, or craft, that are produced by CALD groups and individuals in Western Sydney.

THIS ADVOCACY BRIEF

This brief provides practical recommendations for how universities and community-based organisations can join forces

to implement creative arts projects with CALD groups, with the integration of evaluative research components, aiming at enhancing the lives of the people of Western Sydney.

While a more exhaustive set of key points emerged during the *Media, Art and Stories* consultations, this advocacy brief focuses on the key themes that are central to the development of new funding schemes and policy, which allow for a more informed design and implementation of community-based arts projects with CALD groups in Western Sydney through collaboration with research institutions. In advocating for increased support towards such collaboration, the brief contextualises the funding schemes and sponsors for research into community arts practices in Western Sydney.

This brief is intended to be used by anyone involved in the funding, creation and dissemination of creative arts in Western Sydney. This includes community-based practitioners, the arts sector, governments, donors, and researchers. It can be used to:

- Identify opportunities for collaboration among community-based arts practitioners in Western Sydney and universities around particular research areas or research questions;
- Build capacity for practitioners and community groups to develop strategies to seek research funding;
- Assist community-based organisations in the design of research-driven creative arts projects with CALD communities, which enhance a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

THE CASE FOR FUNDING RESEARCH ON COMMUNITY-BASED CREATIVE ARTS PRACTICE

Australia's arts and culture sector contributes approximately AUD\$14.5 billion (6.4 per cent GDP) per year to the Australian economy, and nearly 200,000 people work in the creative arts.¹ Yet, the sector continues to suffer from a lack of funding. Australia is in the bottom third of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations for government spending on arts and culture, and that spending per-capita has dropped over the past decade.²

¹The Australia Institute Background Brief - <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Background-Brief-Economic-importance-of-arts-and-entertainment-WEB.pdf>

²Fielding, K., & Trembath, J.L. (2022). *The Big Picture 2: Public Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative activity in Australia in 2007-08 to 2019-20. Insight report no. 2022-01. A New Approach (ANA)* - <https://newapproach.org.au/insight-reports/the-big-picture-2/>

The level of arts funding in our region in Western Sydney is particularly dire. The *State of the Arts in Western Sydney*³ report, released in 2023 by the Centre for Western Sydney, revealed that although Western Sydney represents 10 per cent of Australians today, the region only received 3.4 per cent of federal arts funding between 2015-2023. Eastern Sydney received 23 per cent. In the same period, 36.6 per cent of state cultural infrastructure funding was allocated to the Western Sydney region, while 66.4 per cent was allocated to the rest of Sydney.

Operating in a sector and region where funding is both scarce and inequitably distributed, it is essential for community arts organisations in Western Sydney to be able to demonstrate the benefits of their work and, more broadly, the positive impact of the arts to stakeholders and donors. However, community-based organisations on their own do not have time or skills to conduct credible research, and funding for this kind of research is even more elusive.

The Australian Research Council (ARC)	\$30,000 - \$500,000	The ARC is a Commonwealth entity within the Australian Government, established as an independent body. It provides funding for arts-related research through its <i>Discovery</i> and <i>Linkage</i> Programs, as well as its <i>Future Fellowship</i> Program. Successful projects may be awarded between \$30,000 to \$500,000 and may run up to five years. ⁴
Australia Council for the Arts	\$20,000 - \$100,000	The Australia Council for the Arts is the primary arts funding and advisory body for the Australian government. It provides funding and support for a wide range of arts projects and initiatives, including research into the arts. Its <i>Arts Projects for Organisations</i> offers funding between \$20,000 to \$100,000 for projects that may involve practice-based research. ⁵
The City of Sydney	\$10,000 - \$50,000	<p>The City of Sydney is one of the Local Government Authorities (LGAs) in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW). Through its <i>Innovation and Ideas Grant</i>, this Council awards between \$10,000 and \$50,000 per year that can be applied towards research. City of Sydney grants are prioritised for projects that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culture; • Promote sustainable and equitable food systems and address food insecurity; • Strengthen social cohesion, community resilience and wellbeing; • Improve our communities' digital literacy and skills; • Support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. <p>Eligible organisations need to operate within the City of Sydney's local government area or be able to demonstrate significant benefits for the area.⁶</p>
The Ian Potter Foundation	\$100,000+	The Ian Potter Foundation is an Australian philanthropic organisation that provides funding to various charitable causes, including the arts, education, and the environment. The Foundation's goal is to support initiatives and organisations that contribute to a vibrant, diverse and inclusive society, with a particular focus on supporting disadvantaged and marginalised communities. ⁷ The Foundation has an <i>Arts program</i> , through which art organisations can apply to receive funding for a minimum of \$100,000 over the course of three years. ⁸ While funding is aimed at providing development and/or leadership opportunities for artists, research institutes and universities also have a pathway to apply for this scheme. ⁹
Create NSW	Undetermined	Create NSW is the NSW Government agency whose strategic objective is to develop and sustain the arts, culture and screen sectors. It has a number of funding schemes to support arts and cultural organisations (including LGAs) to deliver multiple arts and cultural activities. ¹⁰ While practice-based research is listed among the activities that can receive funding, there is no funding allocated to research, and teaching institutions are ineligible to apply for any of the grants provided by the organisation. ¹¹



While funding for arts projects does often involve an evaluative component that analyses the impact of the work created, it is less common for funding to be allocated specifically for the purpose of research. This limited funding and support for arts research is provided through several initiatives and organisations, as shown in the table on page 9.

Alongside the very limited funding scene for research in the arts, there are several longstanding obstacles to funding that specifically affect research into community arts projects, including:

- Competition for funding: there is often high competition for funding from both government and private sources;
- Lack of recognition: community arts projects may not be given the same level of recognition as other types of research, which makes it difficult to secure funding;
- Preference towards established organisations: research into community arts projects may face challenges in securing funding as it may be prioritised toward larger, more established arts organisations, rather than smaller, community-based initiatives.

While continued support and recognition of the value of research into community arts projects is required, these barriers and the limited funding that is available for arts-related research initiatives provide significant obstacles for both practitioners and researchers to collaborate.

³Itaoui, R., Merrillees, D., & Gerace., G. (2023). *State of the Arts in Western Sydney*. Centre for Western Sydney. <https://doi.org/10.26183/tvyv-5r23>

⁴Australia Research Council website - <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research>

⁵Australia Council for the Arts website - <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/investment-and-development/arts-projects-organisations/>

⁶City of Sydney website - <https://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/cultural-support-funding/innovation-and-ideas-grant>

⁷Ian Potter Foundation 2021 Annual Report - https://ianpotter.sfo2.digitaloceanspaces.com/public/Annual-Reports/8459_Ian_Potter_Foundation_Annual-Report_2021.pdf

⁸Ian Potter Foundation website - <https://www.ianpotter.org.au/what-we-support/program-areas/arts/>

⁹Ian Potter Foundation website - <https://www.ianpotter.org.au/can-we-apply/can-we-apply-university/>

¹⁰Create NSW website - <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-support/arts-and-cultural-funding-program/>

¹¹Create NSW Arts and Cultural Funding Program Guidelines 2022-2023 - <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ORGANISATION-GUIDELINES-22-23-2.pdf>



LITERATURE REVIEW

Some of the existing literature on community arts practice offers an overview of the work in this field, alongside key conceptual reflections that exemplify the important relationship between research and the use of media and creative arts with migrant communities. Conceptually, this has been organised around three themes:

- The importance of **storytelling** in relation to cultural identity and representation;
- How arts practice contributes to broader societal **wellbeing**;
- How **social and spatial connections** can foster a sense of **belonging**.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling enables individuals and communities to assume new values and meanings, and to inform new identities. The longer-term social impact of arts and digital storytelling projects may change outsider perceptions of a region. In the last two decades, new cultural and artistic organisations and community initiatives have boosted the cultural vibrancy of the Western Sydney region (Ho, 2012). *Arts & Cultural Exchange* (ACE, formerly Information + Cultural Exchange) has played an important role in this cultural change for Western Sydney and beyond through their digital storytelling projects. Skills development and access to technology allowed participants from marginalised communities to tell stories about themselves, and to speak back to negative stereotypes while emphasising cultural pride (Ho, 2012). Themes explored in ACE's other programs have been cultural identity, racism, and belonging (Ho, 2014).

Salazar (2010) has observed how digital storytelling can recognise changing attitudes towards migrants and refugees in Western Sydney through an examination of *Fairfield Stories*, a project of ACE in Fairfield City conducted in collaboration with Western Sydney University researchers. This project investigated community media practices by recently arrived young African refugees and young Cambodian migrants. The project encouraged participants to produce short digital personal stories and stories of their families and communities, and 'aimed to equip participants with basic multimedia and digital narrative skills to enhance their leadership potential and employability in the creative industries' (Salazar, 2010, p.61). It focused on how social empowerment and inclusion could emerge from exercising communication rights and self-determination as part of active citizenship.

In addition, Alexandra (2008) and Bansel et al. (2016) have each investigated the use of digital storytelling and creative expression as a transformative practice through workshops in Ireland and Australia respectively. These workshops empowered participants to select and construct their own stories, images and interventions in ways that 'actively re/situated themselves in relation to their lived experiences' (Alexandra, 2008, pp.109-110). In each of these examples, the process of actively producing stories that represent the participants and their communities enabled a social and intercultural dialogue (Salazar, 2010).

WELLBEING

Creative expression in many forms can positively influence wellbeing and play a significant role in young people's socialisation (Mackay and Jacobs, 2021). Mackay and Jacobs (2021) evaluated dance programs for young people from not-for-profit social enterprise *Kulture Break*, based in Wanniasa, ACT. They argue that combining expression through dance with wellbeing contributes to both individual and community safety and comfort. Participants reflected that *Kulture Break* provided a safe space to make friends, form strong bonds and feel accepted. This sense of belonging fostered wellbeing. Creative self-expression and skills development increased the confidence of participants.

Baú (2018) has introduced the experience of a participatory photography project that brought together young people from the Congolese, Rwandan, Burundian, and Ugandan communities living in Western Sydney, whose lives are still impacted by the legacy of the conflicts that have been ravaging the African Great Lakes region. The researcher / project facilitator has reflected on how 'the creation of spaces where participatory communication, creativity, and media-making are woven together represents an important method to explore and to build upon for future work in the area of peacebuilding between different diaspora groups' (p.437). Storytelling through photography can redress some of the beliefs that different migrant communities may have of one another, and which are hindering the development of peaceful relations. Baú (2018) also states that 'this method can prove to be particularly effective with the youth, who are more familiar with but also more curious toward the use of media technologies' (p.437).

Aranda, Hills de Zárate and Panhofer (2020) conclude that transcultural forced migrant participants of dance movement therapy 'can feel free to be who they are, free to identify with their culture and express their differences' through body movement and self-expression (p.166). Dance therapy groups can be a transitional space where patients can be in the present and address previous traumatic and painful experiences. This may provide 'firm ground' for verbal and non-verbal understanding, as it 'helps patients to express their culture, fears and their traumas without the need to look for the right words' (p.166).

SOCIAL AND SPATIAL CONNECTIONS TO FOSTER BELONGING

The process of art creation can also connect participants with their cultural backgrounds and local heritage. Mackay et al. (2021) have explored the ways regional, rural, and remote communities in Australia experience arts and culture in their own communities. They argue that meaningful arts and cultural engagement is ideally community-led and community generated. Their interviewees represented rural and regional community arts as 'responsive, participatory, reflective of local heritage and culture, and central to the positive shaping of place and community' (p.39). For rural communities, place, identity, and local heritage are crucial factors for producing and evaluating community arts.

Rosetto (2015) argues that urban performance by young migrants, artistic as well as mundane, can contribute to them physically and emotionally locating themselves within the hosting nation. In the photography project *In Vista*, held in Padua, Italy, young migrants were asked to choose locations for public photoshoots of performances. The creative team photographed the sets and distributed written messages from the migrants to passers-by during the performances. The project articulated various perceptions of visibility and geographic space, and through the urban-centred performances participants also positioned themselves within a national frame.

De Martini Ugolotti (2020) studies music-making from the perspective of social and leisure practices and negotiations of place, belonging and uncertainty in the United Kingdom. Within a music group comprised of forced migrants between the age of 18 and 55, the author conceptualises 'the significance of (in)visible relationalities that forced migrants enact' and 'the entanglement of bodies, sounds and instruments' (p.3). The author regards such rationalities as 'affective practices of diasporic belonging' (p.3) and conceptualises these as 'forms of sociality deeply embedded in mundane activities and registers that arise from shared (though differently experienced) forms of displacement, and that enable momentary but productive domains of belonging beyond ethnic, national, gendered and religious lines' (p.12).

Nunn (2018) reports on a participatory arts-based study in partnership with local governments, organisations, artists, and young people from a refugee background in Gateshead, North East England, and Bendigo, Central Victoria, Australia. The project, in which participants were mentored by and collaborated with local artists, explored 'experiences of (non)belonging among resettled refugee young people in regional resettlement locations' (p.6). The artist-researchers participated in eight to twelve arts/music sessions over approximately three months. Findings showed that language literacy is a barrier for belonging, as well as non-local forces like national policies and situations in the countries of origin. Family, community, culture, religion, relations, place, and connection to home countries are identified as common spheres of (non)belonging. Here, arts can provide 'innovative, affective and embodied modes of exploring and communicating (non)belonging', and help young people 'gain recognition as active agents' (p.4).

In their participatory arts project with young women living in care in Cape Town, South Africa, Shahrokh and Treves (2020) found that a youth-centred, developmental, participatory and arts-based praxis can contribute to building belonging. Participatory arts approaches can provide young women with a space for a 'safe and supported exploration of their identities' and 'can nurture their capacities for building a sense of belonging' (p.95). The long-term engagement of participatory arts approaches can support participants to 'reconnect to their sense of self, to have control of the narratives of their identities, and to have the tools to build their relationships with community and society' (p.91). The authors' layered multiple arts approach starts with self-understanding, building trusting relationships, and mobilising collective power through spoken word poetry to support individuals' navigation of society (p.91). Through workshops using drama and visual arts, participants 'move[d] through cycles of sharing, listening and reflecting on their lived experiences' (p.97), and explored 'what belonging, or home, meant in their present lives, and the extent to which it mattered to them' (p.98).

Hiltunen et al. (2020) also studied belonging using participatory arts-based research in the project *Crossing Borders*. In findings based on their workshops, the authors explored how participants 'narrate belonging through the arts, and how these performances and narratives are embedded in wider cultural and political contexts and social structures.' They defined four stances of belonging: positive belonging, searching for belonging, struggling to belong, scepticism toward belonging. The artistic methods 'encouraged collaboration and sharing' and 'helped provide very nuanced and situated knowledge about belonging... related to personal experience and emotions' (Hiltunen et al., 2020, p.22).



Carey and Sutton (2004) note an increasing interest in participatory arts programmes that are flexible and responsive to local needs of personal development, as well as social cohesion. The authors recommend that arts projects are offered as a 'means by which people can explore and express their relationship with the physical and social environment', and that 'projects must be delivered in a manner that involves and includes local people as partners in the process'. To ensure that benefits for participants will sustain after the projects have ended, these 'should focus on building community capacity through skill development in all stages of project management: need identification, planning, delivery and evaluation' (p.133).

This literature highlights the importance of understanding the experience of diverse communities with media and arts, and the role that researchers can play in bringing to light key reflections on the impact or influence that related projects may have. With specific focus on Western Sydney, the 2021 report *Media, Art and Stories: enabling communities' creative expression in Sydney's West* (Baú, Georgeou and Kreemers, 2021), in particular, provides critical insights into the different storytelling practices enacted through media and various forms of art with which community-based organisations have been engaging. The documentation of these methods is central to recognising further the significance of these initiatives with CALD communities and the importance of conducting research to enhance both understanding and practice around this work.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1 PRELIMINARY SCOPING

A preliminary scoping review needs to be undertaken to understand what creative expression work is currently being done in Western Sydney. Mapping and documenting the activities, collaborators and settings in which creative expression practitioners operate across Greater Western Sydney is critical to:

- Address knowledge gaps concerning which organisations are engaging in creative practice activities, with which communities, and what activities are being undertaken.
- Identify skills and resources needed to design targeted and impactful projects and programmes.
- Create opportunities for knowledge-sharing, capacity building, good practice and mentoring across practitioners.
- Create opportunities for collaborations focused on the development of programmes based on best practice and designed to address identified gaps.

2 PLACING COMMUNITY AT THE CENTRE OF RESEARCH

Through their involvement in a project, community groups can provide invaluable contributions and are at the forefront of bringing a project to life through their stories. When implementing a project and conducting research with communities on the outcomes of that project, organisations must be given the instruments to navigate three key tensions:

- Finding the right balance between studying participants and working with them.
- Providing a sense of continuity to the activities, despite the challenges arising from the funding system.
- Demonstrating that action research is already accrued by the community itself and community arts workers through their work in the field and at the grassroots.

3 RECOGNISING THE ROLE OF RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

Universities and other research institutions should continue to foster links with community-based organisations as part of their wider engagement and research impact strategies:

- Working with existing arts-based practitioners, universities must continue to play a role in supporting community wellbeing through the provision of important training services that provide qualifications for those who may wish to work in the arts sector, and which further improve the existing skills of the workforce.
- Universities have specific expertise in grant writing and in the measurement of the impact of community-based arts initiatives on the wider Western Sydney community. This is a critical skillset that can enhance the work of community-based organisations through research collaboration.
- Universities are pivotal in translating research findings into policy recommendations. A recognition of the role these institutions play should be actioned through enhanced support for the work they carry out in partnership with local actors working at the community level.

4 ENABLING AND FACILITATING RESEARCH COLLABORATION

- The co-production model presented here (p.26) should be the basis of all future research collaboration in the arts sector. It offers an organised view of how communication flows between the relevant actors, and how this dialogue can enable community-based organisations and university researchers to create appropriate forms of arts-based research through an effective exchange of technical skills and local knowledge.
- Additional funding should be allocated to facilitate such collaboration and continue to enhance the impact of creative arts projects with CALD communities in Western Sydney, with the ultimate aim of producing benefits for the broader community.
- Dedicated research schemes should be created to allow partnerships to form from the start of a project, and to enable a research design that is flexible and evolves with community and organisations' needs.



LISTENING TO THE SECTOR

Through the *Media, Art and Stories* consultation process held in 2022, the following key points were agreed:

- Using research to measure the impact of organisations' work with communities would bring a number of benefits to all stakeholders. Among them, it would ensure best practice and the ability to identify what is valued by the communities they serve; it would gather evidence to influence policy change; and it would provide an evidence base to demonstrate the impact and value of creative expression work.
- While communities are the research subject in this area of work, it is useful to consider community members as co-producers of research. This co-production enables a collaborative approach to identifying issues and developing a research plan, and builds capacity for arts organisations and the communities they work with to develop their own research skills. Co-production also addresses the requirements of cultural sensitivity and language skills, which are needed when conducting research with communities in Western Sydney.
- Collaboration should bring value both to the project and to the research. Identifying relevant funding that provides the opportunity to embed research into a project is critical to measure the impact of activities, strengthen the case for the use of creative arts with communities, and produce an evidence base that can inform future work.

The consultations also sought to explore potential models for assessing impact in collaboration between community-based organisations and research institutions, and asked what role participatory research and co-design play in this model. Participating organisations were encouraged to assess their own potential role in enabling and/or hindering the collaborative process.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: INSIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION SESSIONS

BENEFITS OF BEING ABLE TO MEASURE THE IMPACT OF WORK

The use of research to measure the impact of organisations' work with communities to share their stories brings a number of benefits:

- Ensures **best practice**, as research can assist organisations to focus their activities on what is valued by the communities they serve;
- Provides **evidence** to influence **policy change**;
- Provides an evidence base as research can be used to **demonstrate the impact and value** of creative expression work;
- Provides a **theoretical understanding** to inform and support creative expression best practices.

BEST PRACTICE

'There's a large number of community-based organisations – it is incredibly important to be critical of what keeps their work real and grounded.'

'A key problem councils face is how to access hard-to-reach communities. Hence, how to actually engage those communities is one value that research can provide.'

EVIDENCE TO INFLUENCE POLICY CHANGE

'There is a value of research in building evidence that enables organisations to go, for instance, to politicians and make a case for particular changes to policy.'

'Research can be used as a collective data point in terms of mobilising people and organisations; we then need to think about how we use that to shift policy and bring it back to Western Sydney.'

EVIDENCE TO DEMONSTRATE IMPACT AND VALUE

'There is value for all kinds of organisations - councils, arts organisations, community groups - in being able to measure social impact. This is something that we're all being tasked with doing and that universities can provide support with, and act as a sort of reality check as independent/external actors.'

'Becoming involved in independent and expert-driven research would allow us to take a step back from the data we are generating, and to avoid producing outputs that may potentially lead to arts organisations being punished or defunded due to what we are saying.'

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING THAT INFORMS BEST PRACTICE

'Having an external evaluation would be having people confirming that we do really great things. It would be connecting the data points that we have to demonstrate the value of our work, the methodology of our work, the impact we're having and the characteristics of our impact; and really importantly, also in the right form for our audience. This would then allow us to change policy and process, and influence things like curriculum and our funding outcomes for other projects; it would also help us tell the stories of success that we know we hold, and allow expression of community voice.'

RESEARCH IN AND WITH COMMUNITIES: TOWARDS A BEST PRACTICE MODEL

While communities are the research subject in this area of work, it is also useful to consider community members as **co-producers** of research:

- **Co-production:** conducting research together with the community to identify issues and develop a plan, rather than adopting a top-down research agenda;
- **Capacity-building:** the opportunity for both organisations and the communities they work with to develop research skills, for example, to learn how to submit ethics applications;
- **Cultural sensitivity:** this is needed when conducting research with communities in Western Sydney. Community involvement can provide a level of ownership for communities throughout the research process, so they become active participants in, and not the subjects of, the research.

CO-PRODUCTION

'A lot of what we do is what we have termed "reverse research", which means that we go out with a master plan to communities, which is already sort of pre-formed. It's not co-designed. It's sort of developed within Council. We take it to communities to understand how well our plan does or doesn't sort of fit with their needs and desires.'

'We need to keep in mind that our Western, Eurocentric view of data collection processes and our methodology does not always work with the communities that we work with here in Western Sydney. So, the research design needs to come from the community as well, and have a strong community voice.'

'It is so important that everything comes from the community, and research can serve that in multiple ways, in both helping us to better identify what the community wants, and also conveying to stakeholders what the community wants. This is actually what would be valuable and will have impact further down the line.'

CAPACITY BUILDING

'So perhaps we could come up with a model where researchers can train community members, so that the youth actually participate in the research work and translate some of the concepts expressed by participants. And this would also allow us to develop some great skills like how to conduct a focus group, how to write an application for ethics approval; so that they can take these skills into other jobs and not just in the arts. I would love to see a group of our young people lead some research in language with their communities and document it: what is it? Why don't you want your children in the arts? So, it's not only a matter of trying to attract more funding or to prove the impact: it's a matter of, really, how do we better serve the community?'

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

'Sometimes engagement drops off because people in these communities, including young people, have a lot of demands on their time. They often have to take on a paid job to support their family and they often don't want to be seen as pursuing a career that their parents regard as something not worth following. So, you've got these great cultural barriers, which are not even necessarily articulated. And so, in a sense, if you bring researchers into that space, we need to be highly aware of the cultural differences.'

RESEARCH NEEDS

RESEARCH NEEDS I: BASELINE DATA

Preliminary scoping research needs to be undertaken to understand what creative expression work is currently being done across Greater Western Sydney. Conducting an appraisal of the activities, collaborators and contexts in which creative expression practitioners operate across Greater Western Sydney would be a helpful exercise to gauge the level of effort and skills that are currently driving relevant work in this area.

'It would be great to have some work done that would collate existing reports and knowledge from the different organisations that exist in this space.'

'What research can do is provide the bigger kind of contextual landscape that we can't do individually, or even just in Western Sydney. It provides the metropolitan, the national, and the international contexts.'

'It would be useful to map who is where, what they want and what's available in their area, and then find the gaps and work with the community to fill them. You'd see them as opportunities. That sort of research would really help us backup projects.'

RESEARCH NEEDS II: IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITY SYNERGIES

Synergy requires shared viewpoints, experiences and knowledge, and it occurs when diverse or disparate groups collaborate for a common cause. In the context of working with diverse communities, research can assist practitioners to build connections within and between communities, and to elucidate the different realities and experiences of the diverse communities across Greater Western Sydney present in the area.

'Limited time, capacity or funding can sometimes lead to a sort of silo effect of working within a certain number of people's stories; the value of research in that context is that it builds bridges to move across from a particular silo to what might be representative of a wider area and so on.'

RESEARCH NEEDS III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Art plays a crucial role in the culture of certain communities, and it works alongside their wellbeing. This is currently not fully understood in our society more broadly, and research can help to change that lack of understanding.

'The current understanding, both at a policy and political level, of what the arts are, is very ethnocentric. The general awareness is more that of high art, something on the side, a little thing that you dabble in. Whereas for the communities we work in, in Western Sydney and diverse communities more generally, art is life: you can't pull apart art and culture from their wellbeing, it is a way of thinking. And so, trying to get that understood may potentially shift something.'

RESEARCH NEEDS IV: RESEARCH CAPACITY BUILDING

Approximately AUD\$14.5 billion per year are contributed to the Australian economy by the arts and culture sector. This is 6.4 per cent of the country's GDP. At the same time, nearly 200,000 people work in the creative arts.¹² Despite these numbers, the sector continues to remain under-funded. Not only is Australia in the bottom third of OECD nations for government spending on arts and culture, but that spending per-capita has been decreasing over the past decade.¹³

- Poor funding for the arts and culture industry also leads to poor quality projects;
- Community-based organisations alone do not have time, skills or funding support to produce credible research;
- Organisations are left with the burden of having to demonstrate the benefits of their work, and there is a perception that no one is really listening;
- The lack of available evidence about the positive impact of the arts is not being taken into account by relevant stakeholders and donors.

¹²The Australia Institute Background Brief - <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Background-Brief-Economic-importance-of-arts-and-entertainment-WEB.pdf>

¹³Fielding, K., & Trembath, J.L. (2022). *The Big Picture 2: Public Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative activity in Australia in 2007-08 to 2019-20. Insight report no. 2022-01.* A New Approach (ANA) - <https://newapproach.org.au/insight-reports/the-big-picture-2/>

'The defunding of the arts industry can link to cannibalisation, competition, and patchwork funding. This leads to instability, which leads to projects being done in a rushed or incomplete way, which leads to worse outcomes for our communities. Currently, this is the problem. Having all of this is a burden, when it could be a tool.'

'As organisations, we don't currently have time for research. We know that this work needs to be done; we are aware of the social, economic, political, cultural, environmental wellbeing and individual and community impact that we're having. But we don't have the expertise, which means that we don't have the external authority to be a voice in this and make those data sets look really impactful.'

RESEARCH NEEDS V: FRAMING IMPACT

There is a need to reconcile the political objectives of councillors with what arises from the work that community-based organisations are doing, which really embodies community voice.

'There is a mismatch between people who are working with the communities / community-based organisations, and councillors and their understanding of key questions and issues withing communities. The latter may at times be more focused on what plays politically rather than what plays in the community, and how important that is.'

ENHANCING THE PROJECT EXPERIENCE FOR COMMUNITIES: COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS IN ACTION

The role of community-based arts organisations is critical to providing a project experience that represents community voice, and to remaining true to the expectations of the communities involved. Through their involvement in a project, community groups provide invaluable contributions and are at the forefront of bringing a project to life through their stories. In conducting research, either during or after a project, in order to understand its impact on communities (or any changes it may have led to), it is important to put community members at the centre and recognise their role in generating key insights for research findings.

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS ARE NOT SIMPLY RESEARCH SUBJECTS, BUT RATHER PARTNERS IN THE EVALUATION

'Community connection is crucial. The importance of being in the community and being from the community is what makes the work possible. When it comes to local councils, it is down to really being able to understand the needs of what's going on; and to the ability to reconcile that conflict between what the current focus of the council is around arts and culture versus what is actually wanted by the community.'

'There are many interesting aspects at play: the difference between communities, the different understanding of government and the function of government, but also the different understanding of arts and culture between communities.'

THE CURRENT FUNDING SYSTEM DOES NOT SUPPORT THE CONTINUITY OF A PROJECT, DESPITE THE BENEFITS OF THAT PROJECT TO THE COMMUNITY

'Another problematic point is this idea of creating continuity when a project is successful. You're told, well, you got the money and this is a project we can't re-fund now, as we have already funded it. And so, you're punished for the obvious failures by not getting a grant again, but you are also punished for any success, in the sense that you now have to come up with a brand new idea that was just as exciting as the previous one; and the previous one may have still worked really well and you could have kept finetuning it.'

OBSTACLES AND CONSTRAINTS WHEN MEASURING THE IMPACT OF WORK

While conducting research to measure the impact of projects is crucial for organisations, there are a number of challenges that can affect the development and implementation of targeted studies:

- **Network building:** conducting research with a community requires in-depth knowledge of the community itself and its formal and informal workings;
- **Selected benefits:** there is a sense that research needs to focus on demonstrating impact in specific areas in order to build a case for funding;
- **Reporting mechanisms:** intangible benefits that cannot be materially counted are not always taken into account;
- **Research methodology:** significant moments of a project fail to be captured by research due to limitations of data collection methods.

OBSTACLES AND CONSTRAINTS I: THE IMPORTANCE OF A PRE-ESTABLISHED NETWORK

In order to carry out successful research with a community (e.g., a baseline study or a project evaluation), a strong understanding of the context and a pre-established network of relationships with and within the community is needed so that the research can be carried out successfully. This is because such networks are underpinned by relationships of trust that facilitate collaboration between organisations and communities, and access to knowledge held by community members. Yet, network building takes time, and the effort required to build and maintain both networks and trust with communities is not taken into account by funders.

'It usually takes a very, very long time to build up that relationship and rapport and trust with the community, and I don't know of any grant or anything else that allows that time, that provides that flexibility; we had a very successful project, but I had already built those relationships over a year before we actually did the project. And when we put the expression of interest out for people to participate in focus groups, we only had one reply: all the other participants, I picked out of my own circle. So, it was just lucky that I was able to call on people, otherwise we would have had one person and it would have been a failure. I just don't think those sorts of things get enough recognition; that it does take time.'

OBSTACLES AND CONSTRAINTS II: IMPACT FOR WHOM? WHEN SELECTED BENEFITS ARE PRIORITISED OVER OTHERS

Specific categories of impact seem to matter more than others when it comes to funding. If organisations can demonstrate the ability of a project to generate benefits for the local economy, public safety and mental health in particular, this seems to have advantages over delivering other types of benefits that may be more directly related to targeted communities. The dominance of funders' priorities and agendas over those of communities undermines the sustainability of community-based projects because the projects that are funded may not always be responsive to community needs.

'When it comes to providing evidence for impact, if you can draw a line that connects arts and culture with the economic benefit, the public safety benefit, and mental health, then you have a much stronger case to apply for that funding and to be able to put together your arguments.'

OBSTACLES AND CONSTRAINTS III: NARROW PROJECT PARAMETERS AND REPORTING MECHANISMS

Implementing a project with communities is not always linear. Even though an organisation may have received funding to carry out activities in order to achieve specific objectives, the course of the work may take unforeseen directions. These may open useful and impactful paths in the journey with communities. Yet, the inability to collect details of that unanticipated impact, or the risk of moving away excessively from what the project had initially intended to achieve, means that other positive outcomes of the project are disregarded in reports to funders.

'There are tangible things that we are expected to measure, like the number of hours we spend on a project, the number of participants, particular measurable outcomes... But then how about the intangible impact? How about when the idea of the project evolves into something that you hadn't set out to be? How do you capture the informal moments? It's almost as if the impacts and outcomes that are unexpected are not necessarily something that matters. Like a funding application that usually says, 'this is what you can spend the money on.' So, when the project is evolving, and changing, you are really thinking 'how do I measure that?' And in my experience, you almost kind of have to hide it, because now you're reporting back on something that you were not meant to be reporting on.'

OBSTACLES AND CONSTRAINTS IV: THE LIMIT OF WHAT RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES CAN CAPTURE

There is at times an inability to capture, through research, significant aspects of the work that people only experience and benefit from as they are happening during the project. Despite the development of targeted and often sophisticated methodologies to identify and understand impact, research can have limitations in relation to what can actually be recorded and interpreted on paper. Researchers must continue to innovate in order to develop richer methodologies that can offer a more accurate representation of the nuances a project elicits within communities.

'With the current emphasis on innovation in research methodologies, there's a mutual benefit for universities to be able to learn from the experiences of organisations. I think it was a real lightbulb moment for me to hear about those instances that take shape during a project, which are different and more difficult to measure. Yet, they're incredibly powerful and compelling, and contribute to impact. How do we find tools for us to be able to learn, as researchers, about different ways to do research and measure those moments? And similarly, for organisations, to be able to do that work as well? It's obviously not just about tools like surveys and questionnaires, or even recordings of how that went. It's about engaging in conversations with the community and understanding what is now different as a result of the work. It is really difficult to be able to write down and capture these moments because, when they are happening, you are with people.'

COLLABORATION: WHY?

While a model can be useful to visualise both a process and steps for collaboration, key reflections can also be advanced prior to setting up partnerships:

- Collaboration needs to bring value, both to the project and as a research effort in itself;
- The intended outcome should be clarified: how is the result leading to 'project impact' or 'research impact'?
- Based on the nature of the project, it can be established whether a model to track impact should be built into the activities from the start, or it should be brought in at a later stage;
- The priorities of each organisation involved in the collaboration should be clarified, including what type of impact matters to each party and whether there are common denominators.

'It is crucial to identify value early on: what does this collaboration do for us? Why should we be involved with this organisation? Is value being generated both for the research and for the project?'

'The language of "research impact" that is often used is confusing, because it's not actually necessarily research impact. It can also be "project impact". And I think that putting the word "research" in front of it sometimes changes the viewpoint of an external organisation. So, definitions can be critical here.'

'There needs to be an attempt at finding some common ground and potentially using a framework; partly because it's part of the New South Wales Government and other government bodies' modus operandi, but also because it potentially provides a starting point to categorise what's important to organisations as outcomes.'

DIALOGUE AND INNOVATION

While research collaboration is often unexplored territory for community-based organisations, individuals and organisations must be open to reflect on and acknowledge the potential that engaging in such efforts may have, both in the arts sector and in the broader community. Developing cross industry and cross sector collaboration requires the ability to establish an open dialogue between parties, with a shared objective to work together to contribute to new meaningful findings for the field.

'I think there are always issues when it comes to collaboration: within sector, cross-sector, cross-councils... But being able to see the synergies and the impact that this leads to can open up a dialogue that enables us to start new conversations about collaboration, especially in relation to research, across all of these industries. It's all a learning process, it's all about learning from each industry. And I think it's the way to go: once you do have collaboration, once you cross different kinds of industries, there's innovation that always tends to happen. So, it is a learning process, but it is also about opening up that dialogue and safe space for us to be able to be non-judgemental and have honest conversations in terms of how we want to make impact.'



A CO-PRODUCTION MODEL FOR COLLABORATION

Based on the insights from consultation sessions, and noting the importance of researchers working for – and with – the community, Figure 1 presents a suggested model for collaboration.

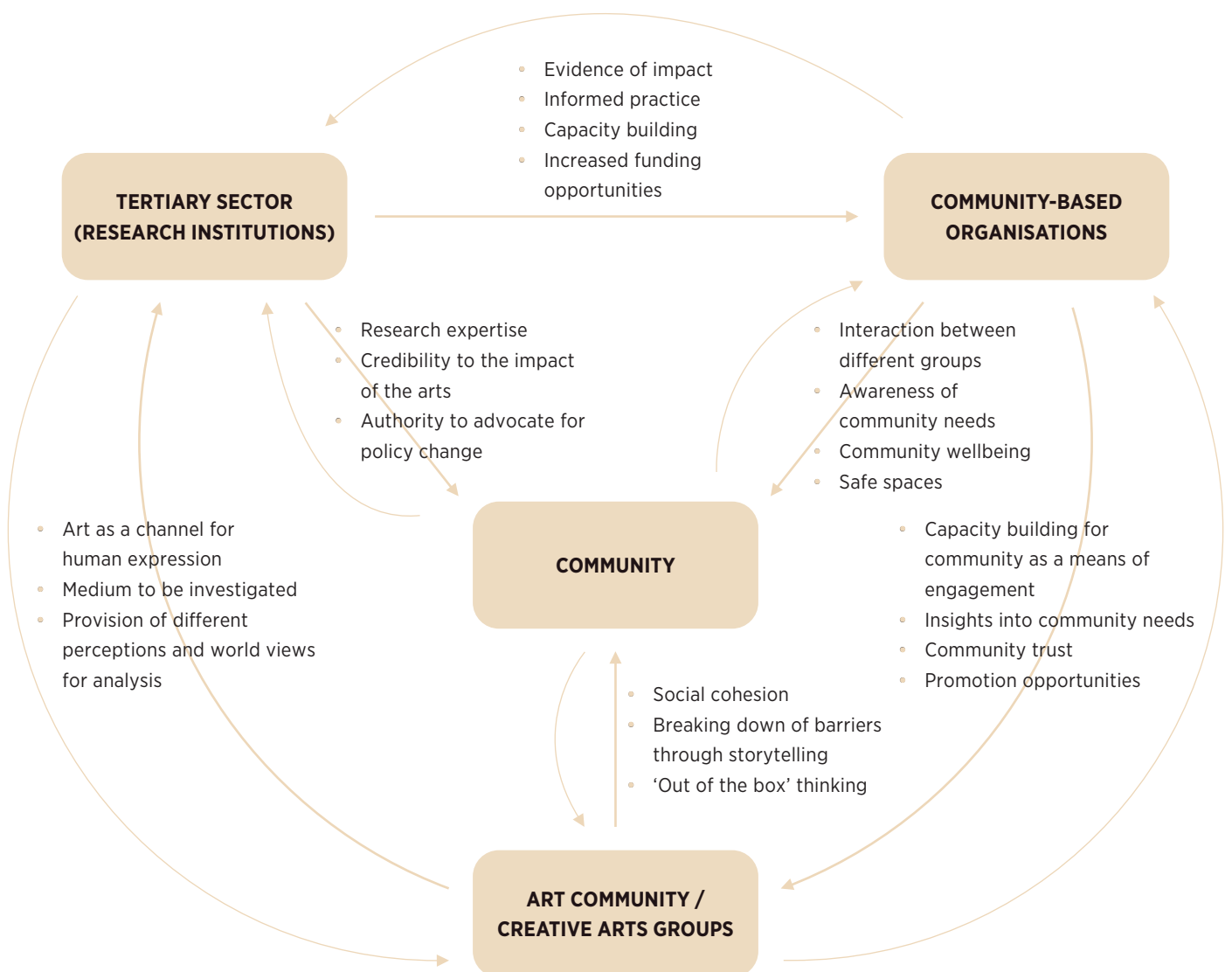


Figure 1: Suggested model for community-centred collaboration

At the centre of the model is the **community**, and at the heart is the idea of community flourishing. This is because the shared outcome among all parties is for the community to flourish.

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

Community-based organisations provide *capacity building for the community* in the art sector. This happens as a result of the strong connection these organisations have with communities. When we talk about the work of community-based organisations, councils are included, as they also work at the community level. Community-based organisations, together with the art community / creative arts groups, provide the community with *safe spaces* to work within and to express themselves.

ART COMMUNITY/ CREATIVE ARTS GROUPS

Community-based organisations also represent the link between communities, creative arts groups, and the broader arts community. Despite the lack of funding and time to provide support to the art space, these organisations can collaborate with art groups to employ a tool such as *art to engage communities* in different ways. At the same time, this engagement provides the art community, which is often very involved but rather isolated, with *opportunities for promotion*. Thus, engaging with communities through community-based organisations gives the art community the chance to build its image and to promote itself. There is also the element of *storytelling* that connects art groups back to the community. These groups have strong storytelling skills thanks to the tools they employ, and they can use stories as a medium to build bridges between different community groups. Moreover, the art community provides the *out-of-the-box thinking* that is required to look for solutions through a variety of approaches, and this is critical.

TERTIARY SECTOR

With particular reference to research, the model illustrates that the role of the tertiary sector is primarily about providing evidence for the arts. The tertiary sector provides artists with evidence-based practices and impact. In so doing, artists are no longer creating the artwork for the sake of art itself, but they are also able to claim what kind of impact their art is actually bringing to the community. Research findings also suggest how this impact can be enhanced. The tertiary sector views art as a *medium for human expression* that is intimately related to what it means to be human and that *channels a multitude of viewpoints*: as such, it warrants *investigation* and *analysis*. In addition to that, thanks to the *expertise* and *authority* provided, the tertiary sector can also offer the community an entry point for advocacy on specific issues that the community wants to see addressed. This could involve, for example, a new report that is released to the public and that grants more *credibility* to the issues that are affecting the community, hence helping to frame ideas for decision makers. Within this process, the tertiary sector also provides *capacity building* to community-based organisations to be able to do their work with communities more effectively. This process operates in a loop.

COMMUNITY

The community (placed at the centre) is connected to all the components of the model. This offers insight into what is happening on the ground and the *needs that may be arising*, which unless that direct connection is kept, would remain overshadowed by external stakeholders' priorities. And while the community is the main source to draw on, all actors provide something to it in return, which contributes to the initial idea of community flourishing.

While research collaboration is often unexplored territory for community-based organisations, individuals and organisations must be open to reflect on and acknowledge the potential that engaging in such efforts may have, both in the arts sector and in the broader community. Developing cross industry and cross sector collaboration requires the ability to establish an open dialogue between parties, with a shared objective to work together to contribute to new meaningful findings for the field.





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