

# The Power of the Arts in Pursuing Social Development Goals: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Inquiry

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## I. Introduction

### ***The arts can change people's lives.***

Most people would agree with this statement. But we usually think of it as true simply on an individual level. “My childhood lessons have led me to a good life as a musician,” a violinist might say. A widow might feel that taking a painting class eases the pain of losing her spouse. Attending a beautiful ballet performance can inspire a young person to take up dancing.

However, recent decades have seen a growing cross-cultural realization that the arts can change the lives of whole communities as well. Experts in many fields of global development are realizing that arts education and community arts practice are potent forces that can propel the social and economic development of neighborhoods, cities, and, sometimes, entire cultures.

The emergence of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals as worldwide standards gives us a new and sharper lens for exploring the connections between the arts and sustainable social change. Perhaps for the first time in history, we are inquiring into the ways that artistic energy can be a driver for every dimension of human wellbeing.

This paper is intended to illuminate these emerging understandings about the power of the arts. I will begin by tracing their evolution through the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and also tracing the development, during these same years, of the global El Sistema movement, perhaps the largest-ever worldwide movement for social change through arts education. I will then focus on some specific ways that the arts can and do effect material social change. Finally, I will suggest some next steps: further avenues for developing these seminal ideas, and specific actions the World Bank and other international institutions might take, as leaders in the global movement for sustainable development.

## II. History of Arts Education for Sustainability

For a number of decades, global celebrity concerts and recordings have been used to raise funds for humanitarian causes. Perhaps the first major example in recent times was George Harrison's 1971 Concert for Bangladesh; follow-ups included Live Aid (billed as "The Global Jukebox") for Ethiopian famine victims; Farm Aid, for American family farmers; and "We Are the World," for humanitarian aid in Africa and the U.S.

Laudable and successful as these endeavors were, they did not change the structural paradigm for addressing social and economic change. They were simply charitable ventures that used mainstream pop music to increase the funds available for traditional kinds of international aid and support.

It was not until the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that this structural paradigm began to change. In 2001, an NGO called the International Council for Caring Communities (ICCC) organized the first symposium that linked music, culture, technology, and health care. The council launched an initiative called "Music as Global Resource" to promote and support music programs with social goals; they identified 105 projects in 45 countries. Particularly notable were music education programs dedicated to serving mental health and substance abuse needs.

Five years later, UNESCO held its first conference on arts education. Meeting in Lisbon in 2006, the delegates identified arts education as a key component of human culture and development, highlighting its capacity to enlighten, fortify, and sustain individuals and communities in every part of the world.

A second world conference, convened in 2010 in Seoul, Korea, produced the *Seoul Agenda: Goals for the development of arts education*, with the intention of turning these principles into action. UNESCO unanimously endorsed the Seoul Agenda, which places great emphasis on the capacity of arts education to help solve social and cultural problems, including:

- promoting peace
- cultural diversity
- intercultural understanding
- creativity and adaptability

UNESCO called on governments and communities to:

- increase access to arts education;
- improve the quality of arts education;
- apply arts education to solving the world's social and cultural challenges.

In 2015, 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with 169 specific identified targets, were agreed to by representatives from every government around the world, at the UN General Assembly in New York City, as part of a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Beyond national governments, the UN also urged civil society organizations, the private sector, local authorities, and educational institutions to commit to achieving the goals. A number of multinational corporations, as well as major arts institutions across the world, have committed to pursuing the SDGs.

A 2017 Manifesto produced in Canada in 2017 called for “Transforming Action on Arts Education: Re-Invigorating the Seoul Agenda.” The manifesto asserted that in the face of the migrant crisis and global increase in racism, xenophobia, and oppression against minorities, there is more need than ever for pedagogies that demonstrate a capacity to foster intercultural understanding and promote cultural diversity—and that arts education had these capacities.

This document also cited the power of arts education to promote environmental awareness by helping to develop people’s capacities to appreciate and empathize with the needs of the natural world. Finally, it noted that arts education contributes to public health and wellbeing, in the following ways:

- Playful arts experiences help children negotiate complex meanings and make sense of the world.
- Through empathic participation in arts experiences, children and adolescents learn construction of identity and the development of civic responsibility.
- Arts have the capacity to “heal the soul and stabilize the mind.”

As a new decade dawned in 2020, there was a heightened urgency around this issue. In the words of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, which initiated the #Culture2030Goal campaign (building on the previous #Culture2015Goal campaign):

“With only ten years left to deliver on the Global Goals – and clear evidence that we are not on track – there is a pressing need to mobilise all resources, seize every opportunity, and identify every accelerator that can help us get there.

“One such potential accelerator is culture. Recognised as a cross-cutting driver and enabler of development, it nonetheless features relatively sparsely in specific SDG goals and targets...This is arguably a missed chance. Culture – including built and intangible heritage and its connections with nature – represents not only a resource for addressing individual SDGs, but also a factor underpinning wellbeing and sustainability more broadly and a means of making the 2030 Agenda more meaningful to all.

“...Full recognition of culture as a driver and enabler of development could open up new possibilities to accelerate progress across the board...

“Yet more work is clearly needed to convince those in charge of national development plans of the value of including culture as an essential element in them...With a renewed focus on SDG delivery in the Decade of Action, we hope that the time has come to recognise the role of culture and heritage as development accelerators.”

In March of 2020, the CULTURE 2030 GOALCAMPAIN released a 100-page report called “Culture in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda.” The report takes stock of the first four years of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda, from the perspective of culture. As a kind of report card on how often and how deeply cultural and artistic activities are used in support of one or more SDGs. It indicates that there’s progress in some areas, but “the cultural dimension of sustainable development lags significantly behind (between one eighth to one fifth of) the other three recognized dimensions (the social, economic and environmental). We would like to see an increase in the share of the cultural dimension in the coming years, at least as much as the environmental dimension.”

“It is sad to confirm, the report concluded, that the potential to relate culture to the SDGs appears to remain largely untapped in national strategies to implement the SDGs.”

Meanwhile, in Africa, the year 2021 is likely to become the African Union’s first Year of Culture. Leaders of 12 African nations agreed to “spearhead the systematic integration of culture, arts, and heritage into the African Union’s development agenda. The arts and culture have been historically overlooked as contributors to achieving social-economic goals across the continent, but that is now changing.”

Even the Federal Reserve Bank of the U.S. was beginning to be interested in this sea change. In the beginning of 2020, they hosted a seminar, Transforming Community Development Through Arts & Culture, explored an evolving era in community development that infuses art and cultural practice. Attendees learned how artists are working with communities and community development organizations to tackle some of the most pressing and complex issues of our time, and why arts and culture strategies are central to equitable development and racial justice.

### III. The Global Development of El Sistema

Concomitant with this growing awareness on the part of international agencies and governmental bodies during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been an unprecedented proliferation across the world of programs committed to activating social change

through music education. The most well-known and widespread instance of this is the global El Sistema movement, which was catalyzed and inspired by the example of Venezuela's massive nationwide youth orchestra network. El Sistema began in Caracas in 1975, created by the visionary musician and social change advocate José Antonio Abreu; at the height of its development, it provided daily intensive music education for 750,000 Venezuelan children and young people, most of them living in poverty. "The worst thing about poverty," Abreu said, "is not a lack of bread or roof. It is **being no one**. Once a child has picked up an instrument, he is no longer poor; he is a child in motion, on his way to becoming a citizen."

Over the next few decades, other Latin American countries followed the example of this extraordinary initiative that used ensemble music education to combat the damaging effects of poverty on children's lives. Robust Sistema-inspired programs exist in many Latin American countries, most notably Colombia (their Sistema program is called *Batuta*, Spanish for "baton") and Mexico (*Sistema Nacional de Fomento Musical*). Substantial government funding is involved in both of those countries.

Beginning in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, El Sistema's fame spread throughout the rest of the world, driven partly by the virtuosic and passionate Venezuelan youth orchestras that began touring the world and taking audiences by storm, and partly by the array of international awards and prizes given to Maestro Abreu, the movement's founder. Hundreds of El Sistema programs now exist in over 65 countries and across six continents, devoted to helping children and young people flourish in the face of many kinds of adversity. They are joined in this effort by hundreds more programs that are similarly inspired to use arts education to combat social and economic injustices. Most of these initiatives are funded by philanthropists, foundations, and civic charities, and occasionally by governments as well. The people who create and sustain the programs, sometimes on shoestring budgets, are artists with social consciences—and the rise and spread of these citizen artists seems to be a unique historical phenomenon.

This growing worldwide movement has led to the development of Arts Education for Sustainable Development (AESD) as a distinct field of academic study. At the University of Graz, Austria, within its Interdisciplinary Master's program in Global Studies, a summer-term Interdisciplinary Practicum in 2019 focused on how El Sistema-inspired programs in Europe contribute to sustainability, with the goal of raising public awareness of El Sistema within sustainability communities. Using the name "music4sustainability," they have launched a social media presence that includes a blog and a Facebook page. One graduate student in the program, Enrique Alejandro Perdomo Echenique, wrote his master's thesis on the ways that El Sistema in Venezuela had contributed to a number of the SDGs.

#### IV. Arts Education for Sustainable Development: What We're Learning

This is a young field. But hard research is now emerging about the substantial benefits of arts engagement in the health sector and the “creative aging” sector, but there is still much to explore and investigate in many other SDG areas. Based on the hard research results and the substantial softer-research evidence we now have in abundance, we can reasonably make the following hypotheses about the positive impact of arts education in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

##### Goal #1: Alleviating poverty

- Children develop a wider set of life skills, enabling them access to better jobs.
- Children’s brain development is enhanced, equipping them with the ability to overcome adverse circumstances in enterprising and creative ways.

##### Goal #3: Good health and wellbeing

- Young people are less likely to be involved in substance abuse, including addictive use of electronic media.
- Children and young people build healthy social bonds; bullying is reduced.
- Social engagement through collaborative arts activities offers young people compelling ways to spend their leisure time.
- Experiences of joy and accomplishment help to create and sustain mental health.

##### Goal #4. Quality Education

- Children’s brains develop faster and more fully, leading to improved academic achievement.
- The definition of education widens to include socio-emotional skill competencies, including resilience, reflexivity, identity formation, critical thinking, and collaboration and teamwork.
- Children develop strong creative capacities, which should be part of any and all quality education.

##### Goal #8: Decent work and economic growth

- As noted above, young people develop a wider set of life skills and competencies—skills such as time management, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal relating, and leadership—enabling them access to better jobs in a wide variety of professions.

##### Goal #10: Reducing inequalities

- Community arts education is always inclusive by nature, leading to more access and opportunities for underserved children and young people. When arts education becomes truly equitable, many other kinds of opportunities become more accessible as a result, and inequality of opportunity is reduced.

#### #11. Sustainable cities and communities.

- Often, a thriving community arts learning program becomes a kind of community center, generating new kinds of activity in the public space of the community, which lead to new businesses and new kinds of work—i.e. instrument repair shops, restaurants, taxi services, and retail stores.
- “Creative placemaking” and other community development initiatives place the arts at the center of revitalization projects and even address intractable complex community challenges through artist-led and facilitated longer-term journeys.

#### Goal #16 Peace, justice, and strong institutions

- Collective arts education builds learning cultures of peace, democracy, and cooperative enterprise. There are many local studies that show the ripple effect of arts-rich schools fostering better school communities and surrounding community environments.
- It also builds learning cultures that are animated by empathic connection. Students and teachers move within their societies as examples and embodiments of peace coexistence and social communion.
- It affirms the absolute value of every child, which makes possible the development of political democracy.

#### V. Two Case Studies

##### 1. El Sistema Scotland

El Sistema Scotland was founded as a private charitable institution in 2009, with the depressed post-industrial town of Raploch as its first program site. Raploch, which lies directly below the hilltop tourist destination Stirling Castle, had high rates of poverty and unemployment and a high instance of substance abuse and domestic violence. Richard Holloway, the prominent Scottish writer, broadcaster, and cleric who spearheaded the launch of the project, had the goal of “creating a community for the kids that can become stronger than the system that’s currently destroying them.”

Big Noise Raploch, as the program is called, is an immersive, highly engaging music learning program that includes every primary school child in Raploch. For the children, this means experiencing playful and engaging music-making every day; preparing for and giving frequent concerts throughout the town, often in public spaces; acquiring previously inaccessible skills of instrumental and vocal music; and learning to work collaboratively in ensembles dedicated to harmony. Any child absent from the program for more than a few days gets a home visit from a Big Noise teacher. Every child has the opportunity to “take a musician home for tea.” Orchestras and choruses for parents have been created by popular demand.

Within a few years, an economic upturn began to take place in Raploch: the program’s increasing fame within and beyond Scotland brought numerous visitors to the town, resulting in the formation of new businesses such as restaurants and shops. Taxi drivers’ earnings picked up. Some parents, inspired by the changes in their children, decided to go back to school and acquire new skills. A new campus of a public university opened in the town, which many residents believe was the result of the music program’s positive effect on the morale and profile of the town. Within three years, the city of Stirling, which includes the Raploch township, deemed the program so vital to the wellbeing of its citizens that it agreed to take over the long-term funding of the program.

Within the last decade, Big Noise programs have been established in impoverished neighborhoods in Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Dundee. The programs are having effects similar to those observed in Raploch. Of particular interest is a multi-year independent research initiative to study the long-term effects of Big Noise in Govanhill, an economically struggling and ethnically diverse area of Glasgow. The research was conducted by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (a government agency) in collaboration with economists at Glasgow Caledonian University. In 2016, the researchers reported definitive findings that the program has substantial public health benefits and is therefore “a good investment for society.” The university economists calculated the Opportunity Cost of Big Noise as follows: the economic impact of running the program would be slightly negative for the first six years, but after that, the program would begin to save the city money, eventually to the tune of millions of pounds. Within fifteen years, the researchers predicted, Big Noise Govanhill will save the city of Glasgow a total of 29 million pounds.

## 2. Colombia’s Batuta Program

In 1990, with civil war escalating between guerrilla rebels, paramilitary armies, and the national militia, Colombia’s refugee camps were overflowing with the largest displaced population in the world at that time, many of them children and youth. It was to alleviate the misery and trauma these young people were experiencing that the Colombian government launched an El Sistema program called *Batuta* (“baton,” in Spanish). Many thousands of children residing in refugee camps were able to spend

hours every day playing Orff and rhythm instruments, singing, and playing musical games. Of the several dozen new government initiatives created during the first wave of funding for civil war rehabilitation, Batuta proved to deliver the most substantial and assessable benefits to Colombians; its funding was therefore increased, allowing it to become a larger national program that reached into communities outside of displacement camps.

Now, almost thirty years later, there is widespread consensus within Colombia's Federal, state, and municipal governments that Batuta has made a substantial contribution to the country's rehabilitation of refugees, and that it continues to play a crucial role in the ongoing process of social and cultural recovery. Much of the federal funding for Batuta comes from the Department of Conflict Resolution; the program's forty thousand students across the country wear tee shirts that say "*Música para la Reconciliación*" (Music for Reconciliation).

Increasingly, Batuta's work involves gang prevention across the country. In major cities such as Medellín, funding for arts learning and community arts projects constitutes as much as 30% of the municipal budget. "Everyone in the government knows that Batuta is a vitally important social project for this country," María Claudia Parias Durán, Batuta's director, has said. "We believe in art for social change. And in our current social crisis of gang warfare, we need to reach both the victim and the victimizers."

## VI. Next Steps

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, international organizations and communities dedicated to the causes of global humanitarian and economic development were focused primarily on the transfer of concrete goods, services, and knowledge from the wealthier parts of the world to less prosperous areas suffering from economic, social, or political difficulties. This is still the case, in large part. The World Bank, long a global leader in these endeavors, continues to concentrate its efforts in the areas of delivering financial aid and concrete goods and services.

The evolution of new ways to think about addressing global challenges—ways that focus and rely upon collective creativity, cultural imagination, and artistic process—means that organizational leaders in the field of global service and development need to open up fundamental new lines of inquiry in these areas. This is not to replace more traditional ways of meeting global needs; initiatives involving clean water, medical facilities, financial aid packages, and other traditional goods and services will continue to be crucial. At the same time, global leader organizations need to be actively exploring the perennially overlooked but unique potency of the arts, and particularly arts education, to deepen, widen, and accelerate many pivotal kinds of social change.

