

Art and community development: the role the arts have in regenerating communities

Alan Kay

ABSTRACT The *arts* are often considered to be at the periphery of the *community development* process and only a minor player in regenerating areas. Despite increasing *globalization*, communities are beginning to recognize their own identity, *culture*, traditional art forms and the value of working together at a local level. This paper is based on a recent study which shows that the arts have a role in *regeneration* and at a local level can be used as a tool within a wider community development programme.

Introduction

We enter the 21st Century living in a world which, in terms of information exchange, seems to be shrinking. Pictures and stories of riots in trouble spots are beamed onto our television screens, vast amounts of money can be moved around the globe by telephone and emails, while Pokemon cards are collected by children simultaneously in Edinburgh and Osaka. In this information age, there is confusion over 'community' – how we identify our own community and where we belong. Communities can be defined either on a global basis in terms of information technology communities or on a local basis as areas where people live together in families, in villages and conurbations. Alternatively, of course, communities have been defined as communities of interest.

Whereas globalization leads to the world's resources coming under the control of large multi-national corporations and thus fracturing local communities, there is residual power in acting locally and providing a voice to the powerless through community development. Many local communities have their own culture and history which adds to the quality of people's lives. In run-down, economically and socially depressed areas community development workers often have to look at a range of tools that will enable

local people to engage together, develop social and economic skills and assume the power to fashion their own future.

One of these tools is the use of participatory arts projects. There is evidence to show that art, as a medium, can enable individuals and groups to become more employable, more involved, more confident and more active in contributing to the development of their local communities (Matarasso, 1997, 1998; Popple and Scott 1999). People-centred development strategies are increasing in vogue and art at a local level appears to be able to add to social and economic regeneration. The question is whether the arts are effective in achieving that aim and what is the real and perceived impact on a community?

Background

In 1999, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Arts Council commissioned a study by Blake Stevenson Limited into the role of the arts in regeneration. The study included a review of the current literature followed by an examination of four very different case studies. The findings from the case studies were then used to comment on the role of the arts in regeneration in terms of *community consultation, involvement and ownership* of the project; the *measurement and links between 'hard' and 'soft' impacts*; the *strategic use of the arts within wider regeneration politics*; and *how arts projects are evaluated*.

Arts and regeneration: a brief review

A review of the experience in Australia, Ireland, North America, and the UK is offered here. Whilst not being comprehensive it provides a flavour of the knowledge base on the role of the arts in community development. It also indicates that community arts projects happen in different parts of the world helping people to develop skills and at the same time allowing them to express themselves through participation. This community empowerment through the arts can alleviate some of the adverse excesses of globalization.

The Australian Council for the Arts commissioned work (Williams, 1997) into the long-term social, educational, artistic, and economic benefits coming from Australian community-based arts projects that they had funded. The subsequent report revealed that arts projects could create a greater understanding of different cultures; more skills in community leadership and management; and a stronger sense of community identity. However, the report laments that there is 'still no evaluation framework for community cultural development which incorporates all the related outcomes to inform the real financial and economic impact of the work' (Williams, 1997).

In 1995, the Irish government's Department of Arts, Culture and

Gaeltacht made a policy decision to address poverty and area regeneration using the arts. In an evaluation of an Arts Awareness Intervention (CAFÉ, 1996) it was discovered that participants on arts project experienced 'a dramatic shift in attitude and appetite for arts education and training', and that arts projects had an impact on self-expression, communication, feeling good, working hard, pride in the making, having fun, and feeling part of the team *as well as* income generation.

In the USA there has been a move to counter the image of the arts as elitist and to emphasize the need to encourage decision-makers and people in general to recognize that the arts have a role in the wider society (Phillips, 1997).

In the UK, ground breaking work in Glasgow (Myerscough, 1988) focused on the economic importance of the arts. This study was part of a national programme which concluded that investment in the arts can influence the regeneration of an area through creating opportunities for training, establishing jobs, attracting arts-related spending power, increasing the attractiveness of an area for business and consumers, and encouraging arts facilities for commercial and non-arts uses.

Since the publication of *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Glasgow* (Myerscough, 1988), there have been a number of studies illustrating the *social impact* of cultural and arts-based projects, mainly through Comedia in the UK.

There is now recognition that many people working on renewal and regeneration programmes in cities are becoming increasingly aware of the human potential of a community, and that the arts can be used as a mechanism to trigger individual and community development (Landry, 1996).

In *Use or Ornament?* (Matarasso, 1997) the social benefits of arts-based developments were emphasized. The author discovered that individual and community group participation in the arts can improve self-confidence and self-identity and found that often the social interaction that comes from active involvement in arts programmes can greatly add to social development within communities. This is particularly evident in cases where those most marginalized and disadvantaged were encouraged to participate.

A subsequent study (Matarasso, 1998b), describing the social impact of Belfast's cultural activity, indicates that community arts projects can impact positively on the personal development of participants and community regeneration. Similarly, in Portsmouth (Matarasso, 1998a), local arts development was assessed in terms of social impact recommending that the arts should be integrated into other services and that more attention should be given to the benefits of arts projects in the regeneration process.

More recently an arts project based in an area of economic deprivation in Plymouth was evaluated (Pople and Scott, 1999) using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data allowing room for anecdotal evidence. As well as comprehensively evaluating the project it revealed some difficulties in the *process and techniques* used in the evaluation of arts projects.

Furthermore, a newly published booklet stated that 'art plays a critical part in empowering communities, providing jobs, skills and training, regenerating urban and rural areas and promoting health and well-being' (Scottish Arts Council, 1999).

In summary, some of the main conclusions to emerge from these significant reports are:

- the arts 'have a serious contribution to addressing contemporary social challenges as they cause social benefits integral to participation' (Matarasso, 1997)
- arts projects would benefit from having agreed, explicit and understandable objectives that they can be measured against (Popple and Scott, 1999) and that evaluation systems should be simple, integrated into the project, with clear objectives, requiring partnership between organizations, and demand on-going commitment (Matarasso, 1998a)
- community arts 'enhances and improves the effectiveness of community development' and should be directly associated with community development projects – not separate (Cullen, date not given)
- 'there is much evidence to suggest that productivity and wealth are increased as a result of greater attention being paid to how to improve the way people work together, build relationships and create futures together' (Williams, 1997)
- 'arts activities were seen as tools with which people could take a greater control over their lives by exploring and expressing social issues of relevance to individuals and communities' (Bowles, 1989)

It would appear then that arts projects located in communities have a valuable role to play in social and economic development. Evidence indicates they can contribute to the overall regeneration of an area using predominately people-centred strategies within a community development framework. The problem, however, is in measuring and valuing that contribution.

Fieldwork

In order to test and expand on the findings to emerge from the above, four very different arts projects were identified in Scotland and subjected to detailed examination.

Initially, over 30 arts projects in Scotland were contacted by telephone and information obtained on their relevancy to the aims of the study. Four were chosen using criteria which included the availability of sufficient data and information on funding; the length of time the project had been established; access to past participants; the size; and the geographical and sectoral spread of the projects. They were selected to reflect the range of arts projects and to give a typical insight into the community arts sector in Scotland.

The four projects which took part in the study were:

- a long established arts project located in a peripheral housing estate in Central Scotland. The project has enjoyed widespread support; has social and economic aims; and initiates, funds, guides and develops a range of arts projects in drama, video production, music, visual arts and literature;
- an arts project focussing on providing training for young people on a peripheral housing estate and carried out in conjunction with community groups. This is a relatively recent project and tends to concentrate on training and employment but at the same time generating community arts for local people;
- a traditional music and dance summer school located in a Gaelic speaking area in the Western Isles of Scotland. This project aims to culturally regenerate a socially and economically depressed rural area through significant arts activity for one week in the summer;
- a city wide arts partnership implementing an arts strategy integral to the local authority's overall aim to regenerate the city. The strategy is not only about community development in the disadvantaged areas but also about capital intensive projects in the city centre.

In examining each of these case studies several social audit methods were used in order to be *multi-perspective*, thus reflecting the view of a wide variety of stakeholders; *comprehensive*, covering all the main activities of the projects; and *comparative*, which would allow for comparison of impact over time and between similar projects.

Each of the projects was profiled and quantitative data was compiled on each which contributed to the general assessment. In addition, each project identified their stakeholders and they were consulted by questionnaire or interview. The consultation covered the areas of community involvement in decision-making, ownership, level of participation, social and economic impact, policy and integration with other projects, and other issues. Those main stakeholder groups consulted differed slightly between the case studies but generally included funders, management committee, beneficiaries, partner organizations, staff, trainees and the wider community.

The key issues were identified for each of the case studies and synthesized into a report which included the main findings of the study, highlighted good practice points and made a number of policy recommendations with regard to the future support of community arts projects.

Main findings

The main findings to emerge from the fieldwork are considered in terms of *the importance of community consultation, involvement and ownership; the measurement of the links between 'hard' and 'soft' impacts; the use of the arts within regeneration policies; and methods used in the evaluation of arts projects.*

Importance of community consultation, involvement and ownership

In arts projects, *community consultation* is important as it solicits the views of members of the community in terms of need and interest. If neither need nor interest are present within the community then it is unlikely that sufficient number of people will be involved to make the arts project an effective agent of change within regeneration. It also encourages partnership between the arts project and the local community who will then have influence on the development of the project.

Similarly, *community involvement* is essential in arts-based projects as they tend to focus on the personal development and attitudinal change within communities. They are people-centred in their approach and therefore change within the community will happen only if there is a high, active involvement by members of the local community.

Community ownership is ultimately important with arts projects working in regeneration as it facilitates a process of local control. If we accept that the arts can be an integral part of the regeneration process then they can be an important tool in empowerment. The fact that local communities feel sufficiently empowered to take control of arts projects and then guide and develop them for the benefit of the wider population can only be good in strengthening the capacity of the community. Skills are developed, responsibility is taken and through the arts the local culture can be changed.

Measurement and links between 'hard' and 'soft' impacts

All the case studies collected 'hard' and 'soft' information. The 'hard' information was generally used to justify the arts activities and was included in reports to funders. The 'soft' data is valued greatly by the arts practitioners but often not used in any systematic way. If policymakers and funders were to give more value to the 'softer' data then arts projects would be more confident to publicize it.

There was evidence in all four case studies that there are links *in both directions* between the 'hard' and 'soft' measurements. Increased confidence and well being will enable individuals to apply for work; and conversely people in employment will feel that they can contribute to their community through a form of active citizenship.

Arts projects should *collect, analyse and present all the data* they collect on a regular basis. It could be categorized according to the original social, economic, environmental and cultural objectives of the project and thus provide a holistic assessment of the whole project. The presentation of the complete story of the organization could then be verified by an independent outsider who will be able to state that the self-evaluation is a true reflection of the achievements of the project. This holistic evaluation can then be used by the project in publicity and changing the attitudes of policymakers.

Strategic use of the arts within wider regeneration policies

It is important that arts projects are an *integral part of an overall regeneration policy*. If not, they are destined to remain on the periphery of the development process.

During the course of this study it was frequently suggested by project stakeholders that some community development policymakers are suspicious of arts projects believing that they are a less serious add-on to the overall regeneration strategy. Arts projects need to *demonstrate why, how and to what degree they are an effective development tool in regeneration. The key to this is developing an integrated self-evaluation method.*

Once there is conviction that the arts have a part to play in the regeneration of an area, then there are a number of elements that have to be considered in order to integrate them into a policy-led framework. They are, the need to embed the arts projects with the local heritage or culture that currently exists; to concentrate on creating a quality product – not only the final product but also the process; and to make it accessible to as many people as possible but at the same time target the most excluded groups such as the young, the old, the unemployed and the disabled.

Arts projects have to operate at *different levels*. Overall, there should be a *national arts strategy*, which establishes the nation-wide framework. At a *regional or citywide level* it is of benefit to have an arts strategy that takes account of the local situation and builds on what is already available. It is important that this strategy fits into the future plans for the area and does not exist as a document separate to the wider regional strategy. Similarly, a *local arts strategy* should fit in with other local development plans so that duplication is avoided and that the arts and community creativity can be used in many elements of community and local economic development.

Arts projects and evaluation

The evaluation of arts projects is of critical importance as there are a number of crucial considerations, namely:

- questionnaires are not popular and are often not completed by local people. Other methods of consultation need to be developed.
- evaluations should not be entirely dependent on outside evaluators. Instead they could be done through self-assessment and then subject to verification by outside 'social auditors'.
- every project is different. Each project has to identify its own set of objectives and underpinning values. A suggested system of evaluation would then assess the social performance of each of the project's own objectives.
- evaluation systems should consider the views of main stakeholder groups. The benefits of this are that a *range* of views are obtained and it enables the project to be receptive and to change in response to stakeholder's views.

- an effective evaluatory system has to still account for quantitative outputs and tangible outcomes. The record system has to be simple; relevant and *seen to be relevant* by the staff and volunteers; and one that relates directly back to the overall objectives of the project.

From the evidence of the case studies the current evaluation method used by the four case studies are only effective and appropriate *to a degree*. In general, they are not entirely useful as they often relate to the funders criteria and not back to the original objectives of the projects. Also the collected information was not always analysed and presented as a complete picture of what the project is, what it does, and how it has performed. In addition, the current evaluation methods are not fully comprehensive, as they do not always take account of the views of all the main stakeholders.

The evaluation methods are crucial to show how effective a project has been. It is important for all the stakeholders to know if the project has been worthwhile. If it is not performing well against its objectives then it should be changed. If it is, then its achievements should be broadcast, as in the competitive environment of limited resources it is necessary to celebrate success.

Understanding the role of arts in regeneration

In order to understand fully the role of the arts in regeneration it is necessary to define the meanings of these terms. The 'arts' is a confusing word that means different things to different people and therein lies some of the problems in understanding. It can refer to the 'fine arts' or 'high arts', exposure to which, can refine the sensibilities of the local population. Equally, it can be used to refer to active expressions of creativity using a practical skill to produce artefacts that can be appreciated. For the purpose of this study, the latter definition was used. During the course of this study, we occasionally experienced mis-understandings over whether the arts should be regarded as a high brow activity that would be good for the local population or whether it was an activity that should be available to all.

Similarly, the word 'regeneration' has a range of different meanings. In this study, we considered it in terms of the revitalization of an area and broke it down into four aspects:

Economic: referring to regeneration through the creation of employment thus reducing unemployment; bringing money into the area through investment and employment; and providing outlets to spend money in the area and invigorate the local economy.

Social: referring to encouraging social connections through facilities, organizations and clubs that can enhance the quality of life through human contact between individuals, families and sections of society.

Environmental: referring to improvements in the surrounding area and buildings to improve the quality of life for the local population.

Cultural: this term is often used in regeneration policy but rarely explored in depth. It is essentially to do with how people collectively see themselves. It is about the image and self-image of an area; but it is also about the heritage, history, traditions and skills within a society.

The arts impinge on all of the above. Active involvement in the development of arts projects can have an effect on all four aspects and can thus assist in the regeneration of an area. However, the question is really about the *degree of influence* the arts can have in the overall regeneration process. The arts could have a *pivotal role* to play in the regenerating of areas of social exclusion. The research established that arts projects:

- are versatile, flexible and wide ranging in the activities they can offer;
- can be used in training and employment;
- are attractive to young people;
- are non-threatening to the most marginalized and excluded in society;
- are good at encouraging economic investment;
- can be used in the development of communities through active citizenship and increased involvement in other community-base projects.

In our understanding of the role of arts in regeneration, we also discovered general agreement that the arts can:

- increase *individual's personal development* by helping their confidence, skills and motivation
- assist in *social development* as participants can make new friends and become interested in new topics
- improve the *local image* with people feeling more positive about where they live, and
- help participants *feel better and healthier* from their involvement in arts projects.

Where the arts have a significant role is in changing the culture of an area. The culture of areas of disadvantage is often complex, but in the same way that schools and companies have prevailing cultures – so do areas. Peripheral housing estates often possess an over-riding culture typified by employment failure, negative peer group pressure, a lack of inspiration, a paucity of creativity, a passive acceptance of 'one's lot', and negative feelings about the area. There is often a ghettoization of poverty and economic disenfranchisement of people that have fewer choices available to them and to their children. It is possible that the arts and cultural activity have a role in changing the culture of the area and make it a more creative and vibrant society for young people.

Certainly, the arts cannot operate independently in the regeneration of a declining area. They have to work hand-in-hand with a wider programme

of community development. This 'bringing together' of arts into community development, and community development embracing the arts in the development of a 'holistic' approach to people-centred development, is one of the challenges facing the arts and community development specialists.

Finally, the realization of the role of arts in regeneration may require attitudinal changes amongst local people, development specialists as well as arts workers themselves.

Conclusions

The arts have an important role to play in the regeneration of areas whose residents are disadvantaged economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally.

The arts have a particular role to play in: encouraging people into training and employment; supporting volunteers and participants in personal development; improving the image of an area; social cohesion and active citizenship; local people recognizing their own cultural identity; and improving the quality of people's lives through individual and collective creativity.

The significance and role that the arts can play in regeneration has to be valued by policy makers and practitioners in community development and regeneration. The value placed on arts project will only be recognized when it is adequately demonstrated through appropriate and relevant evaluation.

Arts projects are most effective when they are 'owned' by the local community. If arts projects are seen as a tool of empowerment – controlled by the beneficiaries and something that belongs to the community – they could have a dramatic effect on regeneration.

As globalization increasingly affects our professional and private lives, the quality of life in the area in which we live will, arguably, become increasingly important to us as members of a community. Collective artistic expression by communities can assist local people assert and empower themselves and thereby countering the negative effects of globalization. The creative energies of local individuals can greatly enhance our culture and encourage more and more people to take an active role in community development. Through the arts we might argue to promote 'a view of community development based on tolerance and human dignity, on needs and not greed, or creative inter-dependence rather than destructive competition' (Craig, 1998, p. 5).

Alan Kay is a member of the Community Development Journal Editorial Advisory Board. He worked on the study referred to in this article while working for Blake Stevenson Ltd.

Address for correspondence: Alan Kay, 20 Marchhall Crescent, Edinburgh EH16 5HL, Scotland.

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