

## **Community Arts Singapore: Framework for a Community Indicator System**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the possibility of integrating arts, culture and creativity-related measures into a Community Indicator System. It touches on the role of the Singapore government, in particular the Community Development Councils, in supporting arts and culture in accomplishing the nation's broader goals. Arts and culture has become a top priority for Singapore, with the government investing great financial resources on infrastructure as well as creative talents to fully integrate arts and culture into the daily lives of its citizens.

**Key Words:** Arts, culture, community, creative, Singapore

### **INTRODUCTION**

As Singapore moves forward into the new year, the next phase of its development will be based on the creative capacity of its people, both local as well as foreign talents. The National Arts Council together with its partners from the five districts of Singapore, the Community Development Councils, creates various platforms for community engagement by integrating arts and culture into the lives of its residents.

Arts and culture have often been neglected in efforts to assess quality of life in Singapore. It is essential to integrate arts and culture-related measures into a Community Indicator System. This system should comprise of periodically collected measures that monitor quality of life at the community level. A framework for a Community Indicator System can be developed. The framework is based on the assumption that inclusion of arts, culture and creativity in quality of life measures is more meaningful when it relies on the collaborative efforts of the government and the community.

Inclusive communities are productive communities. This is the basic principle of a democratic country. Every person and neighbourhood deserves the opportunity to participate in government decision-making, to contribute to economic development through individual and cooperative initiative, and to share in the fruits of prosperity. The Singapore government encourages its citizens to organize effectively through various community and grassroots organisations, to solve their own problems, improve their environment and to contribute to the overall productivity of their community.

### ***A Background on Community Development Councils:***

The five Community Development Councils (CDCs) function as local administrations for the five Districts of Singapore: Southwest, Northwest, Central, Northeast and Southeast. The CDCs administer various government programmes and schemes to help needy residents by providing social and job assistance. They also organise events and programmes to reach out to the community with Arts and Cultural programmes. Through the CDCs, residents are able to get involved in the various community programmes, thus fostering community bonding and social cohesion. As CDCs are closer to the residents, they will be more attuned to the needs of their communities.

Various platforms were provided at the district and constituency levels for local arts groups to perform. The CDCs hold occasional concerts and bring in performing acts for residents. One such activity is the *South West CDC* "Saturday Series" where residents were treated to various visual and performing arts to enhance their understanding of the different cultures.

The *Central CDC* organises a series of arts and cultural programmes. The objective is to promote an interest for the arts and to enhance interaction and bonding of the different races in Singapore. Its Community Life Arts Programme (CLAP) provides a platform for community, grassroots and school-based arts groups to perform alongside professional groups. CLAP performances target residents in the heartlands, exposing them to various arts programmes. Every Saturday, the Heartlands CLAP series perform to an average of 700 to 1,000 residents at various locations.

The *North East CDC* organises a series of music competition called "North East Music Mix". The aim is to reach out to youths in the community allowing them to build up self-esteem and confidence. The event also provides a platform for youths to express their creativity and talents.

Through various arts and cultural activities, the *North West CDC* aims to bridge residents of different ethnic groups together, promoting community bonding and healthy interaction among them. The November month-long North West Arts Festival of 2006 attracted more than 40,000 residents. It served as a valuable platform for the community participants to display their talents, The programmes included ethnic performances as well as rock music performances.

*North West CDC's* "Racial Harmony Celebrations Marathon 2006" involved students from different ethnic groups coming together. Fourteen schools participated with 1,500 students performing various dances, dramas and songs.

Community arts education programmes can play a number of important roles, especially for the youth. These include:

1. Contributing significantly to improved critical thinking, problem solving and decision making. It provides an experience for participants to learn technical and interpersonal skills important for collective organizing.
2. Involving the communication, interpretation and understanding of complex symbols

3. Fostering higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation and judgement.

4. Improving individual health. Engaging in creative activity or attending arts events appears to improve physical health (Angus 1999; Baklien 200; Ball and Keating 2002; Bygren, Konlan and Johansson 1996). The reason could be that arts have the ability to relieve stress.

Through the arts, the Community Development Councils have provided performance opportunities for adults and youths, creating opportunities for them to come together. The arts reach young people in many ways, appealing to the diverse strengths, interests and ways of social engagement (McKay, Reid, Tremblay & Pelletier, 1996). Arts can break down barriers and create trust, particularly in situations where historically there has been a lack of trust. Finally, the arts and performance serve to bring the residents together, creating forums in which other issues can be discussed and neighbours can become acquainted. This is especially important as many heartlanders do not have much opportunities to interact with their neighbours due to the hectic lifestyle of many Singaporeans.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies have been done to show how arts increase social capital and community cohesion (Costello 1998; Dolan, 1995; Dreeszen, 1992; Fritschner and Hoffman, 1984; Krieger, 2001; Landry et. al 1996; Matarasso 1997; Matzke 2000; Murphy 1995; Ogilvie 2000; Preston 1983). Community arts programs involve community members in a creative activity leading to a public performance or exhibit. It provides a way for communities to express themselves and enables artists to engage in creative activities with communities.

Cultural globalization is an important aspect of social globalization. Cultural globalization may be best understood as a twofold phenomenon: (1) the “transmission or diffusion across national borders of various forms of media and the arts”; and (2) “a complex and diverse phenomenon consisting of global cultures, originating from the many different nations and regions” (Crane 2002,1).

Globalization is transforming both the content and the systems through which national and local cultures are produced, reproduced, distributed, and preserved. Cultural policymakers have to struggle to meet new challenges, as global political trends (e.g. decentralization, democratization) and global economic trends (e.g. privatization) create a new environment and place new outcome demands on arts managers. Transnational contact reveals differences and can propel convergence and harmonization. Singapore continues to search for new models and “best practices” to adapt to local needs and conditions.

Culture reflects and serves both the community and the individual needs, because it at once assures us of who we are and inspires us with intimations of the goals we might reach. Singapore’s cultural policy pursues the twin goals of democracy and excellence. It makes the arts and our intellectual and cultural life more accessible to all. It helps to create the conditions under which the finest expressions of

our creativity can be reached and enjoyed by both Singaporeans and the world community. Goulding, Shankar and Elliot (2002) suggests that consumer experience is linked to a series of behaviours, which include narcissistic identity, the emergence of new communities, the need for escape, engagement and hedonism.

Culture connects one individual with another and makes the development of the individual possible. Culture defines how people relate to nature and their physical environment, and through which we express our attitudes to and beliefs in other forms of life, both animal and plant. All forms of development, including human development are determined by cultural factors. It is impossible to talk about culture and development separately, since they are so intertwined together. Cultural freedom is the condition for individual freedom to flourish. It embraces the obligations that are embedded in the exercise of individual rights. Every citizen has a duty to the community in which alone the free and full development of his or her personality is possible. Putnam (2000) argues that communities where citizens are more involved in cultural and other civic organizations have higher levels of “social capital”, which results in more effective levels of governance. This is because “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” develop when people are involved in cultural activities (such as choirs, art gallery visits or cultural performances).

Social capital consists of both informal, community-focused attitudes and behaviors, as well as formally organized behaviors (citizen participation) and attitudes about those organizations and behaviors (empowerment)

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The information for this study has been gathered in several ways:

The most basic approach is simply to analyse the data collected by statistical agencies. The research approach also includes exploring the literature on the subject, by conducting visits to community events, arts and arts-related institutions, and by conducting telephone, face-to-face interviews and survey questionnaires.

Telephone and face-to-face interviews and survey questionnaires were carried out with a total of 50 individuals, companies and local authorities who are involved in the arts. These included policy makers, artists and staff from arts companies who have a particular focus on delivering the arts to the communities. Surveyed arts organisation are involved in multiple art forms; dance (25%), theatre (25%), music (20%), visual arts (20%) and literary arts (10%). The research interviews were designed and conducted in a manner that encouraged linguistic discourse and not in a way that sought a response (answer) to a specified stimulus (question). Questions asked were of an open nature and designed more to empower and enable respondents to tell their story rather than to elicit a specific response. Respondents were encouraged to elaborate on their responses. Additional questions were used to probe where clarifications or contextual understanding was required. These varied from one interview to another depending upon the respondent’s story. The value which individuals attach to the arts will also impact on their responses. This in-lack of standardization of the interviews was

necessary to ensure the validity of the data to gain a thorough understanding of the knowledge and views of the respondents.

The site visits were designed to provide a qualitative understanding of how individual arts organizations approach the task of building arts participation. Topics that have been discussed include how organizations defined its participation goals; how these goals related to its broader mission; how it designed and implemented its participation strategies; what techniques it used; how it interacted with its broader communities; how it defined and measured progress towards its goals; and what it viewed as major challenges to its participation-building programs.

The four guiding principles below help the researcher in formulating a framework for a neighbourhood indicator system:

- 1) Definition of arts, culture and creativity depends on the values, preferences and realities of the residents and stakeholders in a given community.
- 2) The concept of participation in which the residents and stakeholders engage in arts, culture and creativity
- 3) Arts, culture and creative expressions are infused with multiple meanings simultaneously
- 4) Opportunities for participation often rely on arts-specific and other resources

The proposed framework consists of these principles plus four parameters that serve both as domains of inquiry and as dimensions of measurement. The four parameters are:

a) *Presence* – of creative expressions in a given community. Artists should be recognised for their value of their art first.

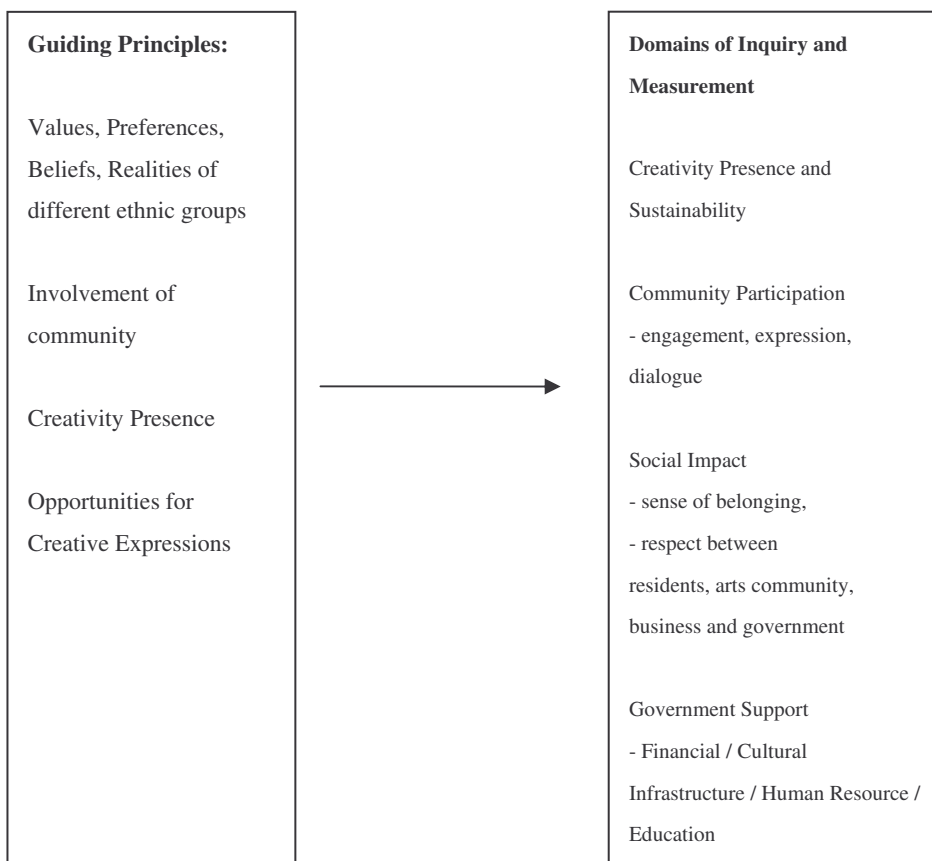
b) *Participation* – by people in these creative expressions. Studies have shown that certain groups are under-represented in participation in arts and cultural activities. These are low socio-economic groups and ethnic minority groups. The barriers to their participation may include lack of diversity in representation of the arts and lack of their own culture portrayed, language barriers, fear of racism and social constraints. The central goals of community development rely on residents having the opportunity to express their values, be self-reliant, and have greater participation and accountability in their community. This is accomplished by education, residents' participation, consensus building and access to information. Community development empowers communities to position local issues within a larger political context.

c) *Impacts* – of these creative expressions and participation in them to community-building outcomes. Participation in arts and cultural activities has been shown to result in the gaining of new skills, improve informal and formal learning, increase self-esteem and feeling of self-worth, promote social cohesion and community empowerment. For ethnic minority groups such as Indians and Sikhs, participation in

cultural activities relating to their own cultures can result in enhanced sense of pride within the ethnic community.

d) *Support* – in the form of financial, organisation, infrastructure, human resources and education to bring opportunities for participation in these creative expressions. Research has shown that there is a link between cultural participation and increased literacy and that participation in music and visual arts is linked to being above average in reading, maths and behaviour. Participation in arts education can lead not only the development of arts and knowledge skills, but also the development of communication and social skills.

**Proposed Framework for Arts Research and Measurement**



**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The study also found out that while many arts organisations are aware of the importance of engaging audience in socially inclusive activities, they have not done so. The respondents have cited constraints in time, human and financial resources as the main reasons. The survey found that 75% of

the respondents agreed that arts can play a key role in fostering community bonding. At the same time, 76% of the respondents felt that the government can do more to help individual artists develop their talents and business.

Engaging the local community can increase audience attendance at theatres, art galleries, and arts-related events. The social impact, in turn, promotes the creation of a cultural sector in Singapore, enhancing the image of the nation and promoting Singapore as the international stage with events such as the Singapore Arts Festival. 70% of the respondents agreed that arts activities successfully help to bring in visitors and tourists to Singapore. A majority of them also felt more positive about the place where the festivals took place, and felt that they have become more interested in the arts as a result. Arts and culture are development tools that can contribute to building networks and trust in the community, and help create a sense of belonging.

A strong sense of belonging to one's community can be important for social engagement and cohesiveness. The study shows that 68% of the participants have a stronger sense of belonging to their community

An interesting finding from the survey showed that 68% of the respondents felt that the government does not consider public opinion seriously before implementing certain arts policies. This could mean that the respondents felt there could be more consultation of public views before certain policies are made. The common criticism is that the government has already made up its mind to introduce certain policies, and seek public opinion afterwards.

One of the key recommendations from this study is that further research should be encouraged to carry out long-term impact assessment studies in personal and educational development of young people's participation in museum activities. Museums should be proactive in responding to community needs. At present, many see museums as mere buildings which house artefacts. The contribution of museums to cultural inclusion could be further studied.

## CONCLUSION

This article explores the possibility of integrating arts, culture and creativity-related measures into Community Indicator Systems. The proposed framework is a useful tool in including arts, culture and creativity as important dimensions of community well-being. I present both opportunities and challenges to policymakers, artists, arts organisations and community workers alike. Arts and culture are increasingly recognised as an integral component of Singapore's social fabric, contributing to the economy and quality of life in the country.

Community workers need to be partners in the creation and implementation of studies and data collection efforts. Arts practitioners must contribute to the vibrancy of the arts community by producing quality works. Information must flow back and forth between potential participants and arts organizations. Arts organizations must know their target audience, what motivates their participation, and specifics about their lifestyles.

At the same time, policy makers must be more open to the views of the public and develop strategies that enhance community bonding. Arts and culture are able to create a collaborative environment in which artists, cultural groups, residents, business and government can engage and forge stronger partnerships with each other.

Creative city thinking yields an opportunity to take the lead in convening policy makers to discuss linkages among cultural, economic development and other community building initiatives. This is also an opportunity to involve grassroots and community leaders to think “out-of-the-box” and build their stake and impact in the community. Communities and culture enrich the vibrancy of Singapore’s cultural landscape, while culture can provide a socially inclusive platform for races, ages and backgrounds to interact. Social inclusion is a crucial element of government policies and it important for the government to develop a framework to test the success of the process and participation of the different community groups in arts and cultural activities.

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