



**CHANGING
THE STORY**



Image: Film crew of Budhan Theatre. Credit: Budhan Theatre

Working Papers Series #1

'Post-Participatory' Arts for the 'Post-Development' Era

Paul Cooke & Inés Soria-Donlan, October 2017

#changingthestory Working Papers

‘Post-Participatory’ Arts for the ‘Post-Development’ Era’

Paul Cooke and Inés Soria-Turner

To highlight the centrality of ‘participatory development’ to mainstream international development practice, one need look no further than the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, dedicated to creating ‘a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, [...] focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people’ (UN 2015: 2). The importance of active, participatory governance at all levels of society runs throughout the Agenda’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals, but most obviously SDG16 and its insistence on ‘responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels’ (UN 2015: 25). Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which they superseded, the SDGs move away from a view of development focussed on financial and knowledge transfers from the Global North to the Global South looking instead to a far more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the development challenges faced by the world’s most vulnerable communities. Oliver Fox and Peter Stoett, for example, note the widespread critique amongst commentators that the MDGs paid only scant regard to ‘citizen participation’ in their design, describing in the case of the SDGs the very detailed process of consultation that was undertaken in their preparation (Fox and Stoett 2016: 560-1). As the UN Development Group’s report on the drafting process of the 2030 Agenda insists, the UN undertook ‘an unprecedented global consultation’, in order to ensure that ‘a special effort was

made to reach out to the poor, the marginalized and others whose voices are not usually heard' (UNDP 2013: III). We are at an early delivery stage of the SDGs and what participation means in reality largely remains to be seen. In a discussion of the growing centrality of participatory discourses to international development in the early 2000s, Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, for example, argue that while the idea of 'participation' might carry a 'decisive ring of optimism' in its description of a world where everybody's voice is listened to and accepted, in reality the places where the decisions are ultimately made (they cite the World Bank Head Quarters in Washington as an obvious example) are 'ever more removed from the world in which poor people live their everyday lives' (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 1044). It is the aim of this discussion paper to generate a discussion around contemporary practice in Participatory Development, looking at the special role played by arts practice in this regard.

Participation and 'Post Development'

The idea of 'Participatory Development' (PD) first became popular in the 1980s, as the sense grew of the failings and inadequacies of 'top-down' development approaches (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mayo and Craig 1995, Rahman 1995). The work of Robert Chambers, whose interest lay in rural development, was particularly influential. Chambers goal was to 'enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act' (Chambers 1994: 953). Building on several different practices, including 'activist participatory research' (shaped largely by the premises articulated by Paulo Freire in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968) and the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) of the 1970s, he developed a framework called Participatory

Rural Appraisal (PRA), which looked to create opportunities for local communities to not just share their knowledge with outsider practitioners, but also to analyse it themselves. In contrast with RRA, whose ideal objective was for outsider 'investigators' to gain learning through the sharing of local knowledge, PRA transformed the 'investigator' to a 'facilitator' who, in the process of listening to, and actively engaging local communities in decision making, sought to support participants to take control of the process (Chambers 1994: 958). PRA was extremely influential in the development of participatory practice within the development sector (in contrast with RPA, its main first users were NGOs and 'government field organisations', whereas RRA was more contained within the universities and larger aid agencies [958]), and by the mid-1990s PA had become a 'go to' development methodology for academics and practitioners alike, looking for 'alternative, grassroots approaches to development', resulting, Muhammad Anisur Rahman suggests, in a noticeable increase in 'collective action by underprivileged people wishing to improve their socio-economic situation', along with increased 'collective intellectual capacity' for 'participatory (action) research' (Rahman 1995: 24). Such activity had wide-ranging outcomes, including the growth of community organisations developing income-generating activities by mixing internal resources with outside knowledge, rights-based lobbying and awareness raising, and social and cultural activity delivery, such as health and education programmes (Rahman, 24).

Returning now to the SDGs, for all their participatory, inclusive approach to development, there would seem to be just as much cynicism towards them as ever there was to the MDGs. Ariel Salleh, for example, offers what he calls a 'post-development' critique of the SDGs, 'post development' referring to a body of

work by commentators such as Arturo Escobar and Gustavo Esteva which sees the whole western discourse of 'development' as a way of bolstering the hegemonic position of the Global North (Escobar 1995; Esteva, Babones, and Babicky 2013). Salleh challenges what he sees as the 2030 Agenda's failure to address the fundamental power imbalance of global governance structures (Salleh 2016). He quotes William Easterly, a former World Bank economist, who is similarly dismissive of the SDGs, describing them as 'Senseless, Dreamy, and Garbled'. That said, and to a degree damning the SDGs with faint praise, Easterly does give credit for the ways they

reaffir[m] the importance of people's right to self-determination. [...] The decline and fall of the pretensions of foreign aid only tells us not to put our hopes in UN bureaucrats or Western experts. We can put our hopes instead in the poor people we support as dignified agents of their own destiny. (quoted in Salleh 2016: 954).

In their more positive assessment, on the other hand, Eris D. Schoburgh and John Martin suggest that the SDGs are in fact 'implicitly attempting to "correct" the failings of post-World War II development and in a way are a practical response to post-development "theory"', focusing on local governance in order to 'locali[se] the SDGs', which they see as 'a prerequisite of successful implementation' (Schoburgh and Martin 2016: 233). For all its unavoidably universalist rhetoric, the UN would at least seem to be acknowledging the importance of the local context for the delivery of development interventions.

Participatory Arts and the Cultural Turn in Development

At the same time, and further highlighting the turn towards the local, the participatory and ultimately towards the language of 'post development', the 2030 Agenda also sees a central emphasis put on the role of 'culture'. The

‘cultural turn’ in development, along with PD, began in the 1980s but really gained momentum with the establishment of the UN Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997) (Nederveen Pieterse 2010). With the SDGs it has become central to development discourse, considered to play a key role in delivering ‘education, sustainable cities, food security, the environment, economic growth, sustainable consumption and production patterns, peaceful and inclusive societies’ (UNESCO 2015). The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, for example, in its plan for the implementation of the SDGs argues that

Culture will be key in the success of sustainable development policies, as driver and enabler of development and people-centered societies. A holistic and integrated approach to development needs to take creativity, heritage, knowledge and diversity into account. Poverty is not just a question of material conditions and income, but also of lack of capabilities and opportunities, including in cultural terms. (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments 2014).

While the SDGs understand culture to encompass both its anthropological (‘culture as way of life’) and its aesthetic (‘culture as art’) dimensions, particular emphasis is put on the latter. How can cultural practices be utilized to support ‘greater citizen participation in governance’, and thus ‘to strengthening and enriching local sustainability, resilience, and holistic development (Duxbury, Hosagrahar and Pascual 2016: 15)? On the one hand, the creative industries are seen by funders and development agencies as important to economic development in the Global South (see, for example, the UNESCO/UNDP *Creative Economy Special Report* 2013). On the other, the arts are considered an important space for critical reflection on development goals, ‘offering a public site for the abstracted discussion of contentious issues’ (Stupples and Teaiwa 2016: 11; see also Gould 2003; Malloy 2005), for ‘imagining alternative ways

forward' particularly important, for example, in post-conflict settings (Crossick and Kaszynaska 2016: 118).

Given these developments, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that 'Participatory Arts' (PA) are particularly visible in contemporary development activity. PA are increasingly considered to play an important role in supporting civic engagement around the world, 'nurturing engaged citizenship' (Flinders and Malaika 2016: 5). Or as François Matarasso, a key theorist used by New Labour in the development of its cultural policy, puts it, PA are invaluable to supporting 'personal development [...] social cohesion [...] community empowerment and self-determination' (Matarasso 1997: I). Within international development, PA are viewed as 'an essential component of peacebuilding work' in post-conflict societies (Zelizer 2003: 62). For example, the role of community theatre in Rwanda is often cited in efforts to support transitional justice, similarly the emergence of inter-ethnic musical groups in post-war Bosnia (Breed 2014; Robertson 2010). Such initiatives can have immediate, therapeutic impact for participants. They are also often considered to play an important role in the building of stable institutions, and stronger societies, raising awareness of human rights in the face of weak state structures. Thus PA are instrumentalised as 'an essential driver of transformation and sustainable development in the world's most fragile societies' (Living Arts in Post-Conflict Contexts 2016: 11), being particularly visible within the wider turn to PD (Dunphy 2012).

Participatory approaches generally begin as small-scale, local initiatives that might seek to use culture as an instrument to engage specific communities in finding solutions to local problems, further challenging the type of 'top-down' initiatives Chambers sought to question via PRA. Since the 1990s, however, there

has been major investment to upscale these kinds of participatory initiatives. The World Bank, for example, considers such projects as a way of alleviating pressure on aid agencies by promoting 'independence' and 'community resilience' and thus 'cost-saving [and] project efficiency' (Mayo and Craig 1995: 2). At the same time, increasing the scale of such work has, for some commentators, also seen the initial critical intervention of PD 'co-opted' by international institutions. This reached a point in the early 2000s when Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari speculated whether 'participation' itself has become a new 'tyranny', which was leading to decisions being taken that 'reinforce the interests of the already powerful'. 'Do participatory facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making processes [driving] out [other methods] which have advantages participation cannot provide? (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 7). Similarly Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock argue that 'whilst international development organisations may appear to have appropriated concepts once used by radical alternative movements, [...] they have not necessarily swallowed them whole'. The propensity of organisations such as the World Bank to talk about 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction' are used in tandem with terms such as 'ownership, accountability, governance and partnership' in development policy, all of which serves to create a neoliberal model which they ask the communities they support to conform to. 'Dissident meanings are stripped away to ensure coherence', in turn making it more difficult for local communities and those smaller, radical groups that first adopted participatory models to make their voice heard against the din of their larger-scale interventions (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 1057).

With regard to PA in particular, Claire Bishop has provided a particularly

comprehensive critique of their potential to be co-opted by a neo-liberal agenda. She takes as her starting point Matarasso influential work. Whilst, she suggests, must be credited for making a strong case for the arts at a time of funding realignment in the 1990s, she challenges what she sees as his utilitarian approach to art and culture, and particular a worrying tendency in Matarasso for PA as a means of manufacturing social consent, 'creat[ing] submissive citizens who respect authority and accept the "risk" and responsibility of looking after themselves in the face of diminished public services' (Bishop 2012: 14). More insidious still, for Bishop, 'to argue', as she suggests Matarasso does, 'that social participation is particularly suited to the task of social inclusion risks not only assuming that participants are already in a position of impotence, it even reinforces this arrangement' (Bishop 2012: 38). Thus, instead of discussing 'Participatory Arts', she focuses on what she terms 'an art of participation'. By this, she means, considering participation as an artistic practice aimed at producing 'an active subject [...] empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation' to determine their own social and political reality.' The 'art of participation' should be about disruption, about supporting dissent, rather than generating consent (Bishop 2012: 35). To suggest that Matarasso is not aware of, and indeed himself does not advocate for, the disruptive potential of art, it should be noted, is something of a mischaracterisation of his work to say the least. While he accepts that his work was influential on cultural policy in the 1990s, he is deeply critical of the co-option of participatory art by the neoliberal agenda. This co-option he sees beginning with the shift from discussion of 'community arts' in the 1970s and 1980s to 'participatory arts':

The discourse of community arts shifted from radical politics to social healing and its name changed too. During the 1990s, the term community arts was gradually dropped by most people working in the field and replaced by the more neutral sounding 'participatory arts'. This change also reflected an internal struggle between those who prioritised social change and those who prioritised art. This distinction – which I have always believed to be false was expressed in arguments about quality, and it continues today. (Matarasso 2017: 4-5)

This dichotomy is also reflected, it should be noted, in Bishop's work, who argues for the need to think beyond the value of PA as an artistic *process* and to reflect upon the value of the art it *produces* (Bishop 2012: 38). Yet, to whatever extent PA should, or should not, be seen as a process, focussing on the art can be difficult for development agencies and other funders, as the results can be less predictable. 'Good' art (however this might be conceptualised) is almost by definition unpredictable and risky. Grant Kester, for example, dismisses any state-involvement in PA projects, suggesting that participatory projects whose goals and methods are predetermined can only ever produce superficial art (Kester 2011). Or as David Bell puts it, 'an uncritical participatory approach to participatory art supports – rather than challenges – the status quo' (Bell 2015: 81). It is worth noting, of course, that the critique of Bishop, Kester, Bell and others are built upon a specifically western avant-guard tradition within Art History. However, any discussion of 'post-development' PA, must also acknowledge, as Stupples and Teaiwa note, that other traditions exist. Indeed, they argue that this is 'reflected in the lack of terms for "art" in many languages where art and everyday culture, or social life, are deeply integrated' (Stupples and Teaiwa 2016: 4). The notion of the 'artist' and 'creativity' differ widely across the world.

Here we return to the question of localisation. Seeing PA principally as a development tool, driven largely by international funders from the Global North, as it frequently is, where the art is considered to be a by-product of a process, often focussed on achieving social cohesion, or developing western neo-liberal notions of 'entrepreneurialism' or 'innovation' skills, can continue to reinforce the power hierarchies that PA ostensibly seek to trouble. 'Participation' can be seen, as Kate Newman notes, as 'extractive', with project facilitators drawing on local knowledge to deliver predetermined project goals (Newman 2011: 124). However, to focus on the *value* of the art produced – again however this might be defined (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) – has the potential to value better the artistic agency of those in the Global South and therefore those artists' own skills as innovators and actors for social change.

The 'post' in 'post-participation' is not the same 'post' as in 'post-development'

Yet for all the criticism PD generally, and PA in particular, have received, they continue to enjoy great popularity as development tools. Moreover, as Stupples and Teaiwa further note, while the wider concept of 'culture in development' has gained traction since the mid-1990s' 'cultural turn', a strategic and critical focus on the role of the arts and creative sector at both policy and academic level is still very much at an early stage (Stupples and Teaiwa 2016: 20). It is the aim of this volume to bring together academics, international development professionals and arts practitioners to reflect upon how participatory arts are being used to support marginalised communities across the Global South, focusing on how best to build equitable, and sustainable partnerships between cultural practitioners,

civil society organisations and the communities they work with that can take account of the skills and expectations of all concerned. As such, and building on the work of Matarraso, Bishop, Stupples, Teaiwa and others cited above, the 'post' in 'post-participatory' in our title is not to be confused with the 'post' in 'post-development'. In a similar fashion to the way 'post-feminism' takes the deconstruction of patriarchy as its starting point, our understanding of 'post-participatory' does not reject the idea of participation, as the idea of 'post-development' does with regard to the discourse of 'development'. Instead it looks to explore critically the contribution PA are considered to make in supporting communities to effect change in their lives.

Evaluation, Reflection and the Need to Embrace 'Failure'

In their review of using arts-based approaches in citizenship education in South African universities, Kim Berman and Lara Allen write that 'community engagement is not necessarily transformative in and of itself: transformation occurs as a result of on-going reflection and evaluation in striving for the continuous improvement of the engagement (Berman and Allen 2012: 81). However, in practice genuinely critical reflection on a given project is often limited. This can be due to funding restrictions, limiting the amount of time and other resources that can be dedicated to this part of a project, or because of transient or fragmented project teams that have little time to define evaluation approaches before project implementation and then disperse back into their main roles after a project has taken place. As a result, evaluation can be limited to proving the success of an intervention to its funders. As Kate Newman puts it, 'all too often the wider operating context is ignored and there is an inherent

assumption that development interventions can be controlled, and will lead to previously defined outcomes' (Newman 201: 67).

Particularly problematic in this regard can be the question of failure. Paul Clements points to what he terms the 'political tensions' that can arise if an organisation acknowledges failure in evaluation reports (330-1). This is part of a widespread and growing critique of evaluation at a policy level pointed to by Christiaan De Beukelaer and Justin O'Connor. They cite, for example, the UN 2013 Creative Economy report, which entirely ignores 'failed or outright problematic projects', lamenting the lack of 'honest' evaluation of 'failed' projects and 'unsuccessful approaches' which, they argue, is key if development workers are to understand the potential and character of art and art-based practice, and employ such practice effectively. Creativity is 'rooted in uncertainty' and therefore more 'prone to failure' (De Beukelaer and O'Connor 2017: 31). Of course, the very concept of 'failure' is loaded and can mean different things to different perspectives. Reflecting on failure is, of course, crucial to learning, and can help to drive a process of 'course correction' over the lifespan of a project that can lead to outcomes that could never have been envisaged with the project proposal was first written. It is, furthermore, intrinsic to what art projects can potentially do that other forms of development work cannot.

Post-development and 'Soft Power'

The particular impetus for this volume was the Arts and Humanities Research Council Global Challenges Research Fund project *Troubling the National Brand and Voicing Hidden Histories: Historical Drama as a tool for International Development and Community Empowerment*. This project, led at the University of

Leeds by Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison and Will Gould, examined some of the practical implications for the use of participatory arts within a global development context, where nations are placing an ever greater emphasis on leveraging so-called 'soft power' within the context of nation building, on the one hand, and gaining international influence on the other.

The term 'soft power' was coined by the political analyst Joseph Nye in the 1990s to describe what he saw as the increasing emphasis put on the 'power of attraction' in international foreign relations, rather than the 'hard power' of 'coercion or payments', focusing in particular on the role of America, at the time the world's only superpower (Nye 2004: ix). Central to the leverage of 'soft power' is the development of a compelling national 'strategic narrative' that can be 'sold' internationally (Roselle et. al. 2014: 71, original emphasis). Or as John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt put it, international standing and influence is fundamentally shaped by 'whose story wins' (2001: 328). This is not to be understood, for these commentators at least, as a revamped version of propaganda. Soft power, it is argued, is rooted in a sense of 'mutuality', of shared responsibility between nations in order to promote a collective understanding of '*global cultural citizenship* that recognizes shared cultural rights as well as shared responsibilities' (Isar et al. 2014: 8).

As such, the growing importance of 'soft power' can also be understood within the wider turn towards PD, along with the language of 'post-development'. The development agenda is often seen amongst donor nations as part of their soft power strategy. The British Council, for example, views what it considers to be the UK's focus on 'the sharing of knowledge and expertise' as a key soft power asset, an asset that in turn helps internationally 'to fulfill a

practical role in strengthening institutions and civil society and stimulating the economic prosperity fundamental to bringing development to fragile states' (Dubber and Donaldson 2015). Yet for all the concerns about PD activities having been co-opted by large institutions, discussed above, it is clear that within the context of discussion of the UK's 'soft power', there is also a trend amongst some large scale institutions to foster a sense of 'self-critical epistemological awareness' in their work that can challenge, however tentatively, the traditional power hierarchy between funders and the communities they serve (Chambers 1997:32). On the local level, commentators such as Annie Sloman frequently reflect the wider discourse of 'soft power', in this case in her call for community decision-making which transfers the 'balance of power away from the idea of "power over", to "power to", "power with" and "power with-in"' (Sloman 2011: 43). Discussions of 'power' in this context are largely viewed from a technocratic perspective, looking at how power relations impact participatory methodology and how PD can be altered to avoid exploitation, or what limitations restrict PD practices, particularly as large institutions seek to move from 'micro' to 'macro' impact, from 'participation' to 'transformation' (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 7). Conversely, the national 'strategic narrative' can also be seen as an important asset in the way the countries of the Global South project themselves and themselves effect the kind of shift in the balance of power pointed to above. Here soft power assets can be used to gain influence internationally, helping to rebalance the power dynamics of global geopolitics. Moreover, they can also be used to generate national unity at home, be it through the projection of a 'Bollywood' version of India to 'Non-resident Indians living in the West in order to increase inward investment, or to leverage the moral authority projected by

the legacy of Mandela and the myth of the 'Rainbow Nation' in South African- however fragile this authority might be under the Zuma administration (Cooke 2017). The arts are invariably considered to have a key role to play in this work, as a way of supporting the development of civil society, or providing a critical space for 'marginalized communities' to demand inclusion in the national narrative. The aim of *Troubling the National Brand* was to explore, in particular, this last issue. How can discussion of these 'national strategic narratives' be used to engage communities that do not recognise themselves in them? How can these communities be supported to co-produce their own responses to their nation's soft power initiatives to advocate for more inclusive national histories in order to effect change in their lives and to learn from other communities around the world facing similar issues of exclusion? Our specific focus in this project was to use participatory filmmaking to explore how the 'national strategic narrative' is experienced by some of the most marginalised groups in South Africa, India and Brazil, three nations that are seen as key to the development of the Global South. In South Africa, we worked with the Bishop Simeon Trust and Themba Interactive to support groups of vulnerable children to challenge the national story of democratic 'transition'. In India we worked with Budhan Theatre/Nomad Films and with the 'Denotified Tribes Rights Action Group' (DNT RAG) to explore the historical predicament of these so-called ex-'Criminal Tribe' communities in the cities of western India. In Brazil, we worked with Plan International to support groups of vulnerable girls in Codó, a region within Brazil with one of the lowest scores on the Universal Human Rights Index. Through a process of co-production we made a series of video responses by these groups to the way their nations' histories are presented to the world. The purpose of the

videos was to support these groups to reflect upon their place in society, to allow them to contextualize their struggles globally, by learning from the experience of our other case studies, and to develop advocacy materials in order to campaign for change in their lives.

This project in turn led to a wider conversation on the potential of participatory arts for development and subsequently to a further AHRC/GCRF project *#changing the story: Building Civil Society with, and for, young people in post-conflict settings*. The legacy of internal conflict, violence, even genocide poses one of the most intractable obstacles to development in post-conflict states. The on-going lack of resolution of the past is often a very significant factor in the marked fragility of any development gains in such countries. *#changing the story* investigates the efficacy of civil society organisations (CSOs, including museums, heritage organizations, community participatory arts and activist groups) in promoting social reconciliation and respect for equality and human rights in the aftermath of conflict in 5 countries from across the DAC list of ODA recipients and from the OECD list of 'fragile states': Colombia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo and South Africa. Over the last 40 years, these countries have had to confront the material consequences of their violent pasts. Each has a very different relationship to this past, from Colombia, where the processes of reconciliation are only just beginning, to Cambodia where the violence of the Khmer Rouge has passed into history and yet its memory continues to shape contemporary society. The international development community and donor states have invested heavily in the work of CSOs supporting reconciliation initiatives – not least through PA. Much of this work has particularly focussed on children and young people – a disproportionately large part of the population

due to the effects of past violence on their parents' generation. This demographic imbalance is often exacerbated by the long-term impact of a wide range of social issues (e.g. HIV/AIDs in South Africa, on-going visa restrictions in Kosovo). The aim of *#changing the story* is to deliver the first large-scale comparative study of CSO practice across a range of post-conflict societies. Thus, drawing on a far broader set of case studies than those examined in our original project, contributors to this volume explore four sets of interrelated questions:

1. Why use participatory arts as an international development tool? What do participatory arts look like in practice? What can they offer that other approaches cannot? What can they not do that other approaches can?
2. What are the enablers of – and barriers to – successful PA initiatives? How can these lessons be shaped into practical, and sustainable, development projects on the ground, localising best practice to the situation faced by specific communities?
3. What lessons can be learnt from the ways in which PA have been used to help deal with the legacy of past violence or the exploration of hidden histories? How do such projects relate to, and negotiate, questions of 'nation branding' and other 'soft power' initiatives? How can these same initiatives be used to reflect upon wider power-relationships between the Global North and South, as well as within the Global South and how does this relate to the idea of 'post development' theory and practice?
4. What happens after the art takes place? How can a project's success be meaningfully evaluated? How can they be scaled up? How can communities continue to build resilience while also bringing discussions to a policy level?

Contributors are currently writing up their chapters for this volume, which we hope to see in print towards the end of 2018.