# Evaluating the Arts: Position Paper

## Context

There is growing recognition that existing monitoring and evaluation models do not fully capture the complexity of work in international development. Such models can be especially limiting when it comes to evaluating arts-based methods and programmes. The current focus on quantitative metrics can overlook the complex processes that are integral to arts-based approaches (and indeed other methodologies), and can obscure their (positive and negative) impacts. A shift is therefore happening involving rethinking evaluation methods. This shift is being driven in part by the growing need for the UK Government, Research Councils and other funding organisations to demonstrate the results of their funding in more accurate and creative ways, and is necessitated by the need for greater accountability to programme participants, especially in lower income countries. This context, along with the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, provided the backdrop for an online workshop that took place from 21st – 22nd September 2020 exploring the evaluation of arts-based projects.  This position paper provides a summary of the key points that were discussed and developed during the workshop.

## Evaluating the Arts Workshop

The Evaluating the Arts Workshop was co-hosted by the British Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through its PRAXIS project. It brought together researchers from across the AHRC project portfolio, as well as representatives from the AHRC, the British Council, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and UNESCO. Prior to joining the workshop, participants were asked to complete a short survey to provide their reflections on evaluating arts-based projects. The workshop ran over two days. The first day saw presentations about recent evaluations of arts-based projects run by the British Council in ODA countries. This was followed by a virtual world café exploring what different stakeholders need from programme evaluations, how all relevant stakeholders can be incorporated into evaluations, how positive and negative impacts are included in evaluation and what innovative responses can be used to meet these needs. The second day built on these discussions, with participants working in groups to discuss how arts-based methods could be used for evaluation and how to include all stakeholders, including those who might not be aware that they are stakeholders. The outputs from these discussions have formed the basis of this paper.

## Key Points from the  Workshop

### Setting up evaluations

- An over-arching point from the workshop is the importance of **co-developing evaluations from the beginning of the project**, rather than considering evaluations to be the end point. Co-creating the evaluation method will ensure it is relevant to all stakeholders. Beginning the evaluation process at the start of the project will enable the evaluation to be iterative, continually shaping the project from this ongoing learning. Ongoing evaluation after a project's activities are completed is also very important, as it is in these later stages that results and impacts are more likely to be seen.

- This more longitudinal approach requires more time and resources to be allocated to co-developing the evaluation process and carrying out the evaluation alongside project activities. **This means that both funding bodies and projects need to allocate more time and resources to evaluation.**
- The processes of programmes are as important as the outcomes, and indeed these processes always shape the programmes outcomes and impacts. It is important, therefore that these **processes are included in evaluations**.
- It is important for researchers and partners to be able to articulate the outcomes of projects in a way that is accessible to those who have not been a part of the project itself
- Evaluation works best, and is an ethical process, when i**t attends to the specific contexts that the project is working within**. It is important that this is considered from the start of the project to ensure that evaluations are based on what is needed at a local level, for example what partners need in order to be able to engage with local governments or meet their advocacy goals.

## Narratives in the Arts and Humanities

- One of the key strengths of the Arts and Humanities is its focus on **narratives and reflexivity**. This can be harnessed in evaluating the arts as it enables reflexivity over the engagement with stakeholders and the narratives produced can be a key medium to both
- demonstrate and advocate for change.
- The centrality of narratives demonstrates why qualitative data is important for evaluations. This gives space for the narratives about the context in which a project is taking place and allows people to tell their story of their own experiences.
- These narratives, and the use of qualitative data, provides space to think more deeply about how to improve ongoing work and build a better future.
- **A better balance needs to be found between qualitative and quantitative data for evaluations**. This balance should be met by identifying the needs of various stakeholders in the evaluation and giving space for both numbers and narratives.

## Engaging Stakeholders in Evaluations

- **It is vital to understand and include the full range of stakeholders in the evaluation of projects** and understand how they will benefit from a project's evaluation. This includes funding bodies, project partners and the participants. It also includes stakeholders who may not realise that they are stakeholders; for example, organisations who will be able to learn from the evaluation findings or decision makers that the programme is seeking to influence.
- **It is important to understand what "stake" the different stakeholders have in evaluations** to ensure the evaluation is relevant to them and meets their needs. For example, the results from the evaluations might be used for advocacy or further funding as well as to improve future work. It should be possible for partners and participants to use the evaluation in the work they will continue to do after the project has finished.
- Including stakeholders (who might not consider themselves as stakeholders) from the start of a project can enable them to understand its relevance to their own work. These stakeholders can also be bought into the evaluation process – for example policy makers can create art with young people as part of an evaluation.

- **It is important for funding bodies to understand and be clear about what they need from evaluations and why they need this.** Whilst projects need to be accountable for the way they have used resources, funders also need to be explicit about what they need from evaluations and how they will use the data. This can give project teams the chance to develop more creative forms of evaluation that will more comprehensively demonstrate the outcomes of the project.
- Subsequent feedback after the workshop highlighted the value of utilising existing guidance on evaluation and engaging policymakers, for example through the UK Government's Magenta an Green Book.

## Arts as evaluation

- **Art is an evaluation method in its own right** and using it as such allows for an iterative process that enables the work of communities and programmes to continue to improve over time.
- Examples of arts-based methods used for evaluation includes creating Zines, story-telling, filmmaking and theatre. These create spaces for understanding feelings and exploring the processes of programmes.
- When considering methods for evaluation, including arts-based methods, it is important to ensure that they are **culturally relevant** and can be taken forward and used to have an impact by the communities that projects are working with. Innovation is important, but it should be based on existing practices so people are comfortable in engaging.
- Best practice in using the arts as a method for evaluation includes allowing people to feedback in different ways, so they can respond in ways that they are most comfortable.
- Of course, while using arts can be harnessed to create inclusivity in programmes and evaluation, it can also become exclusive – demonstrating again the **importance of iterative evaluations**.

## Key Recommendations

1. **Evaluations should be co-designed from the outset of programmes and should be an ongoing and iterative process,** carried out throughout a project and, where possible, after project activities are completed. This requires project teams and funding bodies to allow for more time and resources to be spent on carrying out evaluations.
2. **It is important to understand the needs of different stakeholders in evaluations**. This requires project teams to engage different stakeholders in designing the evaluation from the outset. It also requires funding bodies to be explicit about what they need from evaluations and why they need it.
3. **Evaluations must be contextually relevant** so that people feel able to engage and to ensure that project partners and participants can continue to use the evaluations in the work they do after a project has finished.
4. **Space should be made to allow evaluations to explore and express narratives**, which is a key value of arts and humanities approaches. This can be achieved by using arts-based methods as evaluation methods. It necessitates the inclusion of more qualitative data, alongside the necessary quantitative outputs.