

# KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WEBINAR

## CONTEMPORARY ARTS MAKING AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION AMONG YOUNG CAMBODIANS



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ON MARCH 3, 2021, **CHANGING THE STORY** AND **OXFAM** WELCOMED PRACTITIONERS, RESEARCHERS, YOUTH, AND COLLEAGUES TO AN ONLINE DISCUSSION ON HOW NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS CAN ENGAGE IN CREATIVITY, CONNECTION AND COLLECTIVE CREATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE.

Dr Amanda Rogers (University of Swansea), Reaksmei Yean (Centre for Khmer Studies), and Sokhorn Yon (Cambodian Living Arts) of Changing the Story research project '**CONTEMPORARY ARTS MAKING AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION AMONG YOUNG CAMBODIANS**', were invited to frame a discussion, drawing on their experience of arts-based research and knowledge of the arts and culture in the Cambodian context.

In sharing a summary of the emerging ideas and questions, we aim to provoke further dialogue on how organisations can engage in collective creation with young people.

### TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia has a long, rich and diverse cultural history, but the context of Cambodia is changing (two-thirds of Cambodians are under the age of 30) and a new generation of Cambodian artist is emerging.

Young Cambodian artists are expressing their own stories that address a range of issues. This includes the maintenance of cultural tradition, the experience of grief and loss, discrimination and the desire for equality for LGBTQIA+ communities, inequality and poverty, the difficulty of pursuing an artistic career, the possibility of 'being together' through the arts, and using the arts to promote environment activism.

## ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIAN ART

The Contemporary Arts Making and Creative Expression among Young Cambodian's research project focused on young artists under 30 to find out about the extent to which the next generation of artists are concerned with making work that addresses the legacies of the Khmer Rouge. The project examined the work of one of Cambodia's leading arts NGOs, Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), through their **CULTURAL SEASON 2020**. Artistic practice is often associated with the expression of being 'Khmer'/'Cambodian' (the dominant ethnic group) but some artists explicitly described not relating to this because they were from an ethnic minority of indigenous community.

The Cultural Season sought to open up who might be included within the national imaginary through direct commissions from CLA by marginalised communities. This is based on the recognition that not all groups will be equally reached through an open call. CLA is also mindful of not creating an expectation that artists from marginalised communities should create work that directly speaks about marginalisation.

A further challenge is that until recently, the arts have not been consistently provided in Cambodia's public education system. Therefore, many young people in Cambodia have limited access/exposure to the arts, which is potentially a contributing factor to the challenge of cultivating paying audiences for professional arts. Without a strengthened arts ecosystem, including paying artists, there won't be the space for new and open conversations about identity, culture and values to take place through the arts. CLA is approaching this challenge by advocating for the inclusion of arts education in public schools and building a network of youth ambassadors.

### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In Cambodia, artists are seen as preserving national identity, communicating cultural values to the public, and upholding tradition. However, social norms, cultural beliefs and traditions are constantly evolving.

**YOUNG ARTISTS ARE GENERATING A SHIFT IN THE ARTISTIC PRACTICE BY CREATING WORK THAT EXPLORES THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES AND FEELINGS, INCLUDING IN RELATION TO WIDER SOCIAL ISSUES.**

This creates new conversations about culture, identity and values that can be seen as part of a wider creative process, but that can potentially place artists at greater risk of criticism and scrutiny.

### THE PROJECT TEAM AND CLA APPROACHED ISSUES OF SAFETY AND EXPRESSION THROUGH STRATEGIES SUCH AS:

- Building relationships of trust with artists over a long period (*CLA has been supporting artists at the local and national level for over 20 years*).
- Setting a clear context and set of expectations for artists to work in. This entailed, for instance, establishing that artistic creations would not be 'judged' as 'right' or 'wrong', and establishing an openness to dialogue and the development of ideas.
- Working with artists to provide guidance, for instance, ensure that artists had a respected mentor to offer support and feedback and to help respond to any concerns about their work.

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