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#ChangingTheStory: Participatory Development and the SDGs

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#ChangingTheStory: Participatory Development and the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals

This AHRC/GCRF Network Plus grant has emerged from the collective work of our project team, some of which goes back decades. In my own case, this has developed from several Participatory Development projects that I've run using [participatory filmmaking](#) to support [youth leadership in South Africa](#). Many of the people involved in our network first came together at a workshop in Leeds in February 2017, funded by a previous GCRF project '[Troubling the National Brand and Voicing Hidden Histories: Historical Drama as a tool for International Development and Community Empowerment](#)'. This event, in turn, led to a wider discussion of the ways in which [Civil Society Organisations](#) are currently working with young people in a range of post-conflict settings, supporting them to shape their own development pathways.

That was nice, but so what? Participatory Arts for Sustainable Development (P. Cooke, 2017)

The 'so what' question is of course hugely complex and has any number of answers, depending of the perspective of the participant involved in a given project. It is understanding this complexity that has driven much of our discussion to date on the 'value' of participatory arts within the wider context of 'participatory development'. 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 Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which they superseded, the SDGs move away from a view of development focussed on financial and knowledge transfers from the Global North to the Global South looking instead to a far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).

As is hopefully clear from the rest of our project's website, #ChangingTheStory is, by no means, 'only' exploring the role of participatory practices in development. Our multidisciplinary team, which involves political scientists, anthropologists, specialists in memory studies, cultural and literary scholars, international development practitioners and locally-based community organisations, has a wide range of approaches and is working with partners that adopt many different methods of engagement. Moreover, we do not yet know all of the questions that we will address in this project, as we will be commissioning at least a further 15 subprojects over the next couple of years. However, as a starting point for the work I'll be doing on the network, along with at least some of the other colleagues involved, we've published [the first of a series of '#ChangingTheStory working papers'](#) on the website that explores the relationship of participatory art within the context of development.

This paper is co-authored with our project manager Inés Soria-Turner, and is aimed at framing a set of papers which will appear as the result of the initial work we undertook during our event in Leeds in February 2017 and subsequently during a series of participatory video projects in South Africa, Brazil and India. Our central questions were:

1. **Why use participatory arts (PA) 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 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?

These are large questions. However over the course of the next four years via a range of workshops, development projects, practical 'tool kits' and research publications, we hope to make a significant contribution to answering them. However, most importantly, we hope to generate a longer term, sustainable, conversation that helps to generate genuinely equitable partnership between colleagues in the 'Global North' and the 'Global South' that supports two way dialogue with young people in post-conflict settings, helping them to effect change in their lives as *they* deem appropriate.