



The **Seven Colours Festival**

Young People and Civic Participation in the Arts



The Seven Colours Festival:

Young People and Civic Participation in the Arts

Research Findings Report

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Executive Summary

Background

Based on our previous research (Rogers et al 2021) we noticed a difference between how artists think the arts relate to society, and how young people imagine this relationship. Young people wanted to see (and connected most strongly to) art works that more immediately engaged with the pressing social issues of Cambodia, many of which are political – including climate change, the expression of identity and human rights (e.g. LGBTQ identity), scams, and democracy. However, artists, particularly in the performing arts and music sectors, must walk a tightrope in making works that address this kind of content, with incidents of censorship most likely to occur in music (Brennert and Yean 2023). This raises the question of how the arts can connect to society, and the possibilities and limitations of this relationship. This project follows on from our initial findings, focusing on young people who may not have much experience of the arts. It considers how the arts may work for young people as a form of civic participation and what that might look like in Cambodia. To do this it traced the journey of four young interns in producing a youth festival (the 7 Colours Festival) during the course of 2023 for Cambodian Living Arts (CLA). We examined their participation in creating the event, how they connected the festival to the social concerns of young people, and evaluated how young people participated in the festival.

Questions

- If young people are given the opportunity to lead the production or development of arts events, what will they create?
- What might this tell us about young people's connection to the arts, and how they view their connection to society?
- How might the arts foster a greater involvement in the social or civic sphere?



Summary Recommendations

- The festival became a bigger event than perhaps anyone imagined or could manage. More consideration could be given to the type of event created, and to the steps needed to facilitate the engagement of interns.
- Clearer expectations on what the desired outcomes might be, and the type of participation fostered, would have helped structure the overall process and created 'buy in' from everyone. Better benchmarks of what constitutes success would strengthen the focus of the programme and evaluation of its success – for example, is successful participation based on audience numbers or depth and detail of knowledge? What does successful participation look like for different groups (e.g. interns, volunteers, CLA staff, audiences)?
- Group composition needs more consideration – particularly keeping it more local to foster better engagement and participation. However, the provinces should not be overlooked. It may have been better to give this experience to young arts entrepreneurs who already have some knowledge and experience but who could have used the festival to develop their skills and capacities in the sector. Alternatively, a mixed group of artists and non-artists would foster new collaborations, ideas and ways of working - because the interns came up with different and successful ideas for connecting arts with social issues, engaging young people, and reflecting young people's concerns in civil society.
- A more structured training programme about the arts would give interns a stronger orientation and enable them to make decisions more effectively. More direct participation in the arts is needed for those without that strong background. Meeting and connecting in person worked best in moving the festival development forward, for sharing knowledge and experience, and for discussing ideas. The interns suggested that this should be more regularly maintained to foster group cohesion or "team spirit".
- The interns learned a lot about the arts, developed new skills and connected the arts to social issues. However, the type of participation created was varied and there is a balance between quality and quantity of participation with civil society issues.
- Participation can involve increasing understanding and awareness of key issues faced by young people, and the festival used arts to do this. The festival was also very successful in developing skills and promoting safe spaces of dialogue with a diversity of voices.
- What are the expectations and the limitations placed on arts – should they promote advocacy? This may not be possible in the current context (for example, the interns retracted their idea to involve human rights organisations more directly. After reflecting on it, they felt it would not be safe for them, the organisations, or the artists).
- Greater budget, better media engagement, and new promotion methods (e.g. reaching out to social influencers, using young people to create and share content) should be considered. Everyone in the festival team commented on the difficulty of getting artists to perform for the amount that was available and that this was not congruent with valuing artists' time.
- It is unclear where the interns go from here – the process built their capacities in some respects but not others. This group was quite active in volunteering, so is it 'another', slightly bigger role on their CVs? This process did not build capacity in the arts sector, nor fully encourage that sector to really think about the connection between arts and social development beyond as audience consumers. However, the interns had new ideas and created sharing knowledge/exchange programmes that were interesting for the sector.
- Interns suggested a more fellowship or work placement would be better where they were placed in the CLA offices and paid appropriately for a set period of work (e.g. 3 afternoons a week). They felt this would encourage greater sharing and facilitation of the festival objectives with CLA staff. It also suggested greater recognition of the amount of work that was involved and appropriate remuneration.

Methods

Background research on how young people view the relationship between arts and civic participation across Cambodia. This was conducted through our previous research on arts audiences, which included 15 focus groups where we explored this issue as part of Cambodian Living Arts' (CLA) 2022 Cultural Season (see Rogers et al 2023).

An open-call application and recruitment process by CLA, where 4 interns with little or no arts experience (but an interest in the arts) were competitively selected to lead the production of an arts festival. The interns called this the 7 Colours Festival. The festival interns were: Khoeun Kamsort; Meak Bopharatanak (Ratanak); Ouk Lykouryu (Kouryu); and Soth Peosamnang (Samnang). They were diverse in terms of gender and background, and Kamsort is based in Ratanakiri. However, they shared commonalities – they were all similarly educated, similar ages (early-mid 20s), and had experience in volunteering or civil society activities.



The initial idea was that this festival would be a celebration of 25 years of CLA's work: interns were asked to select works from CLA's Cultural Seasons (2018-2023) to be re-staged for this event. Over time, the event's role as a youth festival became the driving force, rather than a direct connection to CLA's anniversary celebrations.

We examined how they made decisions as a group and what they valued in that process. We followed the interns' journey through the process of curating works for the festival including learning about the arts, decision making, and gaining production experience. This included observation of meetings, surveys that tracked their skills development and understanding of the arts, focus groups, and individual interviews after the event. We also interviewed the festival co-ordinator Song Seng, who managed and supported the interns. We also asked the interns to keep a weekly photo diary about their experiences with mixed success.

We analysed the festival programme and performances, conducted short vox pop interviews with audiences and volunteers (over 80 responses), collected written and online responses/interactions with the photo exhibition, conducted 4 short interviews with talent show contestants, collected and analysed 77 messages on the message tree.

Civic Participation

There is a difficulty in translating civic participation into Khmer as it is a concept introduced by international NGOs, and as such, has an inevitable Euro-American bias. We have experimented with different translations in different contexts. In the provinces, we translated it as ‘community spirit’, where this was more relatable. We asked about particular kinds of events people may have heard of and if they considered it civic participation (e.g. Run with Sai, raising funds to build a local library, using social media, going to religious ceremonies) and asked them about civic participation in their own lives. In the province focus groups, people needed more explanation of the idea through examples, but it was clear that they had thoughts and opinions about civic participation once an agreed understanding was established. Lack of time was an issue surrounding a lack of participation.

However, young middle-class Cambodians who are university educated, particularly in Phnom Penh, may have volunteered or worked for NGOs. As such, they are more aware of this language. Nevertheless, even here, as our results show with the interns, this understanding was often reduced to thinking about the relationship between arts and society or using arts for social development. In the current context, the language of social development is politically loaded, with the Cambodian government using it to mean positive contributions to society, but, of course, what is positive constitutes a matter of discussion and debate. Some of these contradictions emerged among the interns – for example, there was an expectation that the arts would contribute to ideals such as equality, equity, ability for self-expression (and by extension freedom of expression) but there was also an understanding that the arts could also be used to promote the culture of Cambodia in nationalistic ways that aligned with government interests.



Current policy and research on issues related to the concept of civic participation or Cambodian civil society rarely consider the role of the arts and culture. In this sense, arts are often being divorced from civic participation. For example, Öjendal and Lilja’s (2009) edited collection on Cambodia’s post-conflict democratization and the 2022 Transparency International report on the Cambodian Youth Policy Survey both only consider civic participation in relation to the political sphere. Civic participation is seen as being involved in policy making, local government frameworks and decision making (e.g. voting, donating and volunteering). Similarly, Schröder and Young’s (2019) work focuses on the implications of Cambodia’s shrinking civil society for agriculture, gender (in)equality, income (in)equality and land rights issues. The exception to this general trend is Young (2021) who examines how photography is used by underprivileged communities to advance political claims in relation to environmental justice, based on an understanding of how everyday photography using smartphones can enable people to express claims to citizenship, rights and identity (Young 2023).

However, broader academic work in development studies and in post-conflict contexts does consider how the arts can contribute to a feeling of inclusiveness and cultural ownership. This research specifically examines how young people can use the arts to advance rights claims, particularly regarding gender and equality (Cooke and Soria-Donlan 2019). As such this work has the concerns of civic participation at its heart but does not necessarily use this terminology. In addition, such work tends to see the arts as providing a space of resistance through which alternative social or political possibilities are acted out and made manifest (Cin et al 2023; Mkwanzani et al 2023). Where questions of participation do emerge, often in development studies literatures, there is a concern with how questions of participation and civic participation reproduce power relationships and injustices (Cooke and Kathari 2001). In other words, participation as a phrase promises empowerment, inclusiveness, democracy and various forms of ‘positive’ development, but the process of enactment and decision making can not only dull these processes, but actively prevent them (see also Breed and Prentki 2018 in relation to the arts).

This study therefore brings these areas of work together, in considering how engaging young people in the arts may promote participation in different ways that may relate to the sphere of civil society. It also considers how the arts can foster the transferable skills needed for civic participation and the limits to this process.

Understandings of Civic Participation among Young People

This section highlights that:

- Young audiences view civic participation as a collective project to improve society and create solidarity.
- Young people drew attention to inequalities and different forms of civic participation.
- Arts and culture were seen as an entry point into enabling civic participation and creating democratic forms of dialogue.
- Young people consider what ‘good’ participation might look like.
- Educating and attending arts events are seen as a form of civic participation. Artists also viewed their work as promoting civic participation.
- Whose responsibility it is to promote the arts is an interesting question that is often absent from discussions.



From our preliminary research with young audiences and artists in both Phnom Penh and the provinces, there was a strong sense overall that people understood civic participation as a collective project, as things that they did as a group for the wider benefit of society *“we don’t do things for our personal sake but for the common interest”* (focus group participant). It was also seen as *“giving back to society”* but it was also about life skills and *“taking care”* – of people, environment, communities (focus group participants). Participants also suggested that civic participation was not only about raising money or giving money (this was also present in the TI 2022 report, where one question was about donations) but a broader feeling of wellbeing, about being *“fulfilled individually”* by doing something for others (focus group participant). Province audiences seemed more physically engaged in this, because participants discussed literally building their own library, fixing the roads, donating money to the local hospital after their group had performed, or helping older people.

There are also different modes of participation which participants discussed, such as giving time, money, skills, capabilities, gaining inspiration. There was also recognition that *“not everyone participates equally”* and that this may be due to people’s situation and positions, that you may want to *“stop injustice”* but this comes at personal risk (focus group participants). So whilst *“using your voice”* to address oppression or do the right thing was seen as part of civic participation, *“having a voice”* was not always possible (focus group participants). In both Phnom Penh and province data, some focus group members highlighted that things that

may be perceived as being for the benefit of everyone are only focused on the individual. For example, focus groups often saw going to the pagoda, or social media use as a mode of civic participation (particularly in one instance where a local community found a missing child). However, they also noted that people may express opinions on social media, or talk about themselves, but this is only indirect participation, it is not direct action or sharing knowledge for the greater good. Similarly, participating in religious practices was seen as being done for the benefit of an individual receiving good karma, rather than joining together to do a social good:

“We participate in a general open public manner (re: social media and opinions) [...] they think as an individual but they participate in public, talking about society. But their thoughts are individual.”

“They have no purpose other than to receive a good karma (for themselves)”

(focus group participants).

However, civic participation was seen to start from the individual (though it does not necessarily only benefit the individual) and then built outwards into the community:

“It needs to start from us on a small scale.”

“A society can grow not only from the village chief or the commune chief there, but also from every citizen in that community’s unity, and togetherness, such as by building roads or building schools. Thus, to have achievement does not start from one person, it starts from every individual so that we can create an achievement”

(focus group participants).

Others recognised that the ability to be open to criticism is also part of participation. There was a lot of discussion around the form of participation and its effectiveness, with ideally “small contributions leading to big changes” (focus group participant). This co-existed with a more pessimistic view that without lots of people involved, even small changes can have little effect. There was also recognition that there was not always a direct cause and effect.

Some participants discussed how contributing to society and addressing social issues felt “too big” and described the need to change through joining “specific communities”, organisations, roles etc (focus group participants). Arts and culture felt one such small level. This was particularly because the arts were seen as being able to draw attention to issues and “create conversation”, which was one of the first steps to enhancing civic participation:



But some other people like my friend who went to watch it, I feel that we never paid attention to those things before. But after watching it, we started to have a conversation about it. And in that role, there are other people talking about that as well”

(focus group participants).



The idea that community spirit is for the common benefit, and that there can be disagreement and dialogue is a very democratic impulse and one understanding of civic participation. Sometimes civic participation was directly discussed in relation to democracy – and the difficulty of that in Cambodia because “you cannot do everything you might want” owing to the political context (focus group participant). Participants identified a fear of speaking out about contentious issues, hence civic participation was also “finding another way to do things” (focus group participant). However, it was important for some to state (particularly among artists) that civic participation did not need to be about rebellion against the government – but about helping to solve social problems, collectivity, and sacrifice for a greater/common good. This was not necessarily a pro-government agenda but a desire for critical thinking to see why certain problems emerge and what might be done to facilitate solutions to them. However, the right not to participate and not to agree was also identified as part of a democratic understanding of civic participation:

Agreement and disagreement can happen at the same time.”

“They have rights to participate or not to participate based on their viewpoints. We can see that sometimes they participate in those activities for their personal benefits, but sometimes they join for the common benefits. Some participations give indirect benefits to society.”

“I think that this participation creates solidarity. We have to be in solidarity. It does not mean that every individual must participate. Solidarity creates a common voice which everyone decides to be right and appropriate for them. It creates a platform for everyone to participate and share their ideas”

(focus group participants).

In some respects, this is idealistic, and in Phnom Penh, some participants were quite critical of Cambodian society, particularly the tendency to look abroad whilst ignoring what was happening at home. They saw the need to “*address and improve society and culture at home*” but of course what that looks like is a political question (small p) (*focus group participant*). In focus groups, there were questions over where participation might lead, and in a simple sense if there were good and bad forms of participation, then there would be positive or negative impacts (rather than more grey areas or trade-offs). Participants in the provinces talked about the difficulty of having everyone collectively join in together in an activity in their village when one family out of 20 became rich, and they did not help with the road building but instead asked everyone to plant trees and grasses. They helped, but this pointed to the difficulty of fostering collective spirit as Cambodia’s wealth

inequalities increase, or suddenly become apparent. More generally, participants also talked about the “*difficulty of making change*” as people will “*avoid problems rather than finding solutions*” and they also talked about how “*Khmer people have to help themselves break a culture of dependency*” – or at least try (*focus group participants*). This resonates with Ear (2012) who describes a culture of dependency fostered through Cambodia’s historically high numbers of NGOs. Relatedly, arts and culture were seen as contributing to society by “*bringing happiness and peace*”, “*not necessarily for change but to make it peaceful, balanced*” (*focus group participants*) – this argument suggests that one can be involved and participate in society, but that this leads to maintaining the status quo. This was unusual as most people had a sense of involvement and improvement when discussing civic participation, but it is worth noting that this view was present.

Educating children about art and attending arts events was often seen as forms of civic participation. This is interesting because audiences are often seen as passive, but experiencing “*a focused feeling*” was seen to make you actively engaged (*focus group participant*). As outlined in our previous research (Rogers et al 2021, 2023), art was seen “*as a tool for carrying messages*” (*focus group participant*), so the educational component of arts is key to its civic capacities: supporting the arts was seen as supporting Cambodian culture/society. For other participants, it was clear that arts often created emotional well-being and that entertainment could be a route into thinking about social issues:

Most of the art happened from society’s talk. Even though it comes from imagination, it is still related to social issues. Thus, it shows the way of life of people in society. So, when we see them and we learn about art to develop the country. And that benefit is to promote the culture”

(focus group participants).

In context – there was a sense that when you participate in the arts, you learn about what issues are faced in society and can then think and work to solve those issues. To a certain extent this is evidenced in the data we collected – perhaps the stage of problem solving has not been reached, and there is a question around how far the arts can realistically go in this regard, but nevertheless, the beginnings of this process are there.

Artists often viewed their work as a form of civic participation – by using arts to entertain and educate, to promote belief, the nation, community, equality, and to pass on cultural knowledge. In the provinces one artist was part of a group who donated the money from their performances to the local hospital to help older people. Artists also saw themselves as role models and as needing to uphold certain core values both for society and for their own creative practice:

I am not trying to say that I am a model, but we know that when we do something, we inspire people, especially the younger generation, to follow our path. That is why we need to have a model. We have to be a model for the younger generation. We cannot do unrighteous things. Even on Facebook, I share information to show the public and arts experts that to understand, they have to share that information too because in the arts community, we have to support ourselves. If we, artists, don’t support our arts, who will support it? If we are the expert, we get the salary, why shouldn’t we take part? That is one thing. That is what I think about my participation. After the participation, I always share it with other people. I share because I want young people to join us and get the opportunity to understand it. Back in the day, we thought that some particular work and activities can bring benefits (to society). It has helped to improve my understanding, viewpoints and concepts to develop new works or excel my artistic skill. It helps me to understand things more critically”

(focus group participants).

The same was true of teachers in the teacher training colleges where performances were held, who similarly took the view that it was their responsibility to preserve and pass on cultural knowledge. This is part of their civic responsibility and mission:

When we go out to work in our respective districts, we should integrate into education, introduce them to the values of culture, and encourage them to participate in love. Culture and preserve our culture for everyone.”

“As teachers and young people in that society, we should have a clear understanding of our culture, our art, and what we have. And after understanding, we will share through teaching or advertising or out as an activity that is attractive for children”

(focus group participants).

There was a lot of discussion about the role of social media in this, and those who did attend focus groups pointed out that if teachers were not interested in dance or art that children would not be interested. They also highlighted that the number of teachers and students interested in dance specifically was small, the lack of arts subjects in the education system, but the need to interest children/students from a young age. Younger audiences also emphasised this and suggested the need to know about art from childhood so that they value it from an early age:

I suggest explaining to people that art is part of life. Have art program in private schools, public schools from elementary to high schools [...] Cambodia in terms of art and culture is very rich. But obviously I look at today young people, including me, don't know much about art. Instead, young people seem to be immersed in foreign modernity like Kpop”

(focus group participants).

Whose right and responsibility it is to promote the arts is an interesting question in the context of civic participation yet it was absent from many discussions. The question of ‘should we be doing this – or should the government or local authorities?’ was missing – there was a broad acceptance of the idea that if something needed doing, people would try to do it themselves. Even down to those members of a focus group who literally built a road themselves from the village to the pagoda. However, unusually, participants in a focus group in Battambang explicitly tied the issue of civic participation to the question of rights and responsibilities as expressed in the Cambodian constitution:

Civic participation means citizens can do some activities in their society through participating or expressing their thoughts and sharing information freely. Briefly, article 49 of our constitution talks about the rights of the citizens which means that they have the right to participate in any social work no matter if it's about the arts, politics, leadership or religion related activities. People have to participate in solidarity. Our country cannot be developed unless we join hands. This is the meaning of civic participation.”

“I personally think that civic participation refers to the fact that citizens have the responsibility in building or developing our country as a whole. There should not be any excuses to not join any events. We all have to join in all the activities”

(focus group participants).

It was seen as the right and the responsibility of the citizen to participate in the social realm, in solidarity, in a collective effort. It is also democratic when viewed in these terms because *“civic participation at this point means democracy. Meaning that the citizens would stand as the core and they can freely express themselves or participate in any events”* (focus group participant).

There were, therefore, very strong expectations around the role and possibilities of arts practice from both audiences and artists in terms of benefitting the social sphere, enabling self-expression and community building. The 7 Colours Festival offers a deeper insight into these processes among a group of young interns and the extent to which the arts and arts production may promote engagement in civil society.

Origins and Meaning of the 7 Colours Festival



The background and meaning of the “7 Colours Festival” came from a clear desire to connect the arts to civil society in Cambodia. It emerged from a group discussion about what values and theme the interns wanted the festival to have. The conversation focused on rights, politics and being scared to speak out. This led to a discussion of the LGBTQ fashion designer and artist Em Ream, questions surrounding freedom of expression regarding creative practice, and the expression of LGBTQ identity. At this point, the interns had considerable discussion about how free they were to express their ideas, but they were not always sure how creativity, identity and freedom of expression connected. The interns initially wanted the word “freedom” in the title of the festival because they felt that

they had small voices but could use the arts to express themselves. There was, inevitably, a discussion about the sensitivity and limits of using this word. They then talked about hope, rather than freedom, and from that they landed on the idea of colour and rainbows, and that is how the title evolved. The title therefore came from a discussion about politics and the civil society sphere, and a desire to connect key issues in this realm to the arts. It is important to note in the Cambodian context, that this discussion was about freedom of expression, but was not associated with a desire to overturn the government (as might be inferred from 7 Colours in the recent context of government discourse about a so-called “Colour Revolution”).

In their own words, therefore:

Seven Colours festival is an arts programme that connects to society with the purpose of social diversity and reflects on roles of the arts in connecting youth to society for promoting social diversity and inclusion through showcasing art pieces, panel discussions and sharing knowledge and experiences of people in society”

(intern focus group, Samnang).

For the interns, the title reflected and promoted diversity. It is tempting to think of rainbows and associate this with LGBTQ identities – indeed, this is what we as researchers and the CLA staff immediately thought. However, the idea of seven colours was broader as it represented the promotion of diversity in general (ethnicity, religion, age, gender, generation). More specifically, it also tied the festival to Cambodian culture in terms of thoughts and beliefs where the number 7 is important. Most obviously, it represented the idea of 7 days in a week and the association of a different colour for each

day. The idea of having 7 generations (three older generations, three younger generations, and oneself) is a traditional idea in Cambodian culture, as is the idea of thinking and twisting the tongue seven times before speaking. In this respect, the festival title holds multiple meanings that connect to Cambodian culture and society.

At a simple level, therefore, from the outset, the interns saw the possibility for art to positively contribute to society and to connect with young people. This was also reflected in the purpose of the festival:

To promote youth participation in social development through creative arts.

To promote identity in the sense of respect and value.

To enhance dialogue on the relationship between art and social development.



Simultaneously, they came up with the idea of '*crampon*' as a theme – a crampon being a piece of metal used in traditional Cambodian architecture to connect blocks of stone together. In this respect they were thinking about connecting across generations, across different groups and ideas. This was an easier (also Cambodian) way of framing what they hoped to do. However, when designing the festival programme, this became more difficult and confusing to implement. The interns felt that they lost their way, and so simplified their thematic focus on youth whilst retaining the festival's core purpose. They collectively decided on a theme for each of the three days of

the festival: **Youth and the Past; Youth and the Present; and Youth and the Future.** This helped simplify decision making about what to include in the programme and structured the festival. However, in practice, it introduced another level of complexity to decision making, for some of the programming selections, choices and decisions did not always match the festival's stated themes and ideas - or did so in ways not fully thought through (for instance, what is inferred when traditional and indigenous dances are positioned as 'the past', what does it mean if a pop concert dominated by male singers is 'the future', what artistic and societal values are promoted?)



Initially, the interns stuck more to the Cultural Season format that they were presented with and were less likely to debate their preferences. They had differences but seemed to accept these and “write them first and decide later” (Kamsort to Samnang). As they became more independent and confident, they sometimes met without Seng or Tola, but this led to arguments at times (e.g. around logo design). Although there were collective programme discussions, Seng asked them to produce individual festival programmes so that

they could focus on what each of them wanted. These were then shared and discussed with the group. Seng then asked them to produce a collective programme based on their own ideas and selected works from productions previously presented by CLA. During this process they began to realise that they did not find the works presented as part of CLA’s Cultural Season focused on young people’s concerns but as slightly “old school”, and viewed them as being for those with more experience of arts, rather than for those needing an introduction to the arts:

We have our own theme and goals. Our programmes are designed for youth, the Cultural Season programmes fit their own theme. We didn’t want to follow the CLA’s format, we wanted to have new things for youth”

(interview, Meak Bopharatanak).

Developing the Programme

The interns met regularly throughout the first few months with the festival co-ordinator, Song Seng, and Say Tola (who had a dual role helping with both the festival co-ordination and the research). Amanda Rogers was also present at many of these meetings earlier and later in the process. Initial meetings consisted of sessions where artists shared their experiences of organizing festivals and producing programmes. The interns also collectively brainstormed ideas about what they wanted the festival purpose to be, its theme and title. These were decided upon by the group and acted as a reference point throughout the process. This enabled the interns to take ownership of the festival and they were encouraged in this. The interns were then asked to look through the past Cultural Season programmes and think about what works they might like to re-stage and how these may align with their festival purpose and theme. From observing the process, Seng Song as festival co-ordinator gave them quite a lot of free reign and support in making their choices. He regularly encouraged them to be creative and think outside of the box, so they could include other performances they had seen and bring new ideas to the table. He did not want them to be limited by concerns over what the festival ‘should’ be or look like.

They therefore went back to some of their original ideas and incorporated these into a programme that they collectively created. This combined a CLA format with some of their own ideas, and was refined in detail with Seng and Tola before being presented to the CLA senior leadership for feedback. There was then a ‘lull’ where not much happened, and the interns’ participation seemed to decline as it took time for them to respond to tasks. The interns wanted to do more, particularly around publicity and social media, and regularly stated this. However, their actions did not always match their stated intentions, and when they were given tasks, the timeline seemed to conflict with other elements of their life (e.g. student work, jobs, health etc).

This meant that tasks were not completed, or they happened very slowly. There are other reasons for this, which I discuss in section 4. But a key issue is that the interns were initially contracted with curation rather than full production, but then were asked to move beyond this. Interns drew a difference between volunteering and this being a job because the production of the festival was too big for them – the expectations were perhaps too high. Indeed, one of the interns was not present at the festival itself but on a training programme in Thailand, although they posted and called regularly throughout the festival to try and help co-ordinate, but they were not able to help on the ground. There was no recourse for this situation.

In moving towards production, the interns took on board some of the positive and wide-ranging feedback they received from CLA. One important piece of advice they received was about not moving between venues as that would require more technical support than was possible. They had not considered this practical side of the event because they did not know about it, and this was something that they learned and implemented. As a result, the festival was staged in one venue (Coconut Park), with film screenings at Bophana Centre. The interns also accepted advice about the selection of traditional dances presented on the first night, particularly indigenous dances that they did not know much about but were curious to see. They were also encouraged to have more of a ‘wow’ event on the first night to help create buzz about the festival and draw people in, rather than focusing solely on the concert at the end. As a result, they included Thon music and dancing that audiences could join in with at the end of the first evening.

In some ways, whilst the interns learned a lot about arts through curating the programme, the combination of budget, venues, artist availability and combined preferences meant that they ended up with an event that was not substantially different to what they started out with. For example, Meak Bopharatanak and Ouk Lykouryu both put in their applications that they loved Moni Mekhala as a dance – not simply because it was classical dance but because they viewed it as a classical dance about a strong woman. Khoeun Kamsort also loved this dance and so there was a combined desire to have it in the final festival programme. Workshops on mental health, on human rights, on clay-making, questions of diversity, things that the interns felt were important to them, or that they identified as important to young people in Cambodia, all featured early on in brainstorming sessions, and were retained in the final programme (even as they temporarily disappeared during the process of looking at CLA works specifically). The interns did develop through the six-month period, particularly in terms of confidence and soft skills, but in some ways, what they liked did not change. Indeed, in the festival itself, only one work that could be traced to CLA was performed (a staged reading of *My Son, Look at that Beautiful Rainbow*, a piece that addresses LGBTQ acceptance within families). CLA Cultural Season events were more expensive than other types of artist and arts activities (e.g. concert performers) owing to salaries and rehearsal time. Venue hire was also very expensive – more so than anyone had considered, something that raises the issue of how young people can create events promoting arts independently of major organisations and funders. As a result, many CLA works were simply unaffordable, and the interns also preferred shorter pieces, although they all regretted being unable to stage the lakhoan niyeay *My Choice*.



The Festival Programme

The final programme from 8th-10th December 2023 encompassed a three-day event, with an amateur photographic exhibition present throughout and stalls selling food and drinks.

Day 1

'Youth and the Past'

Evening Opening

Short presentations of different forms of traditional dance and music including Mohori music, blessing dance, robam Moni Mekhala and Thon music.



Day 2

'Youth and the Present'



Morning

Arts and mental health workshop



Afternoon

Creative writing readings by young writers



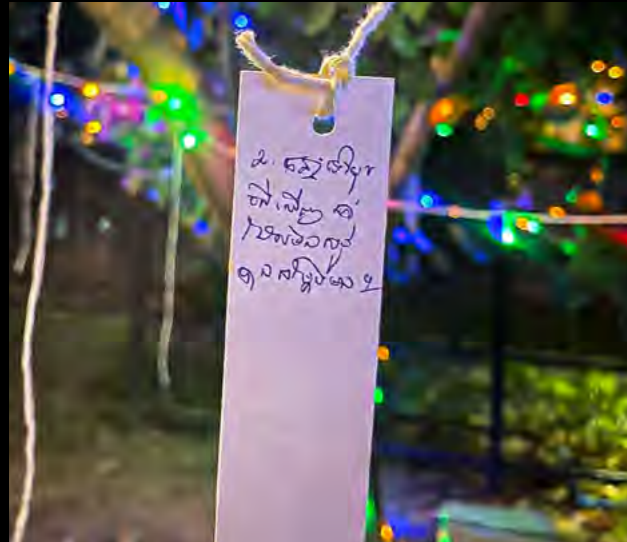
Evening

A range of performances, including traditional dances such as the harvest dance and Robam Bes Kravanh, a staged reading of *My Son, Look at that Beautiful Rainbow*, a contemporary dance performance by SilverBelle and a performance by the Medha Women's Drummers.



Day 3

'Youth and the Future'



Morning

Panel discussion on the role of youth in taking part in social development through the arts, a performance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals song, and a message tree where people could leave messages for the future.



Afternoon

Open workshops on clay making, painting and drawing, traditional and contemporary dance, and song writing, as well as film screenings at Bophana Centre.



Evening:

Open-call talent show, photo competition winners, a drag and fashion show with the theme 'I am... and I believe...' and a pop and hip-hop concert with various musicians.



What is immediately apparent is that the final programme was ‘pick and mix’ in style in order to promote active participation; it contained many shorter performances, panel discussions and workshops. They were connected by what appealed to young people, whilst also addressing some of their key societal concerns, as the interns described; *“We’re trying to connect youth to the arts and to youth issues through arts, not the general issues. Thus, I think it responds to how we engage youth to the arts through our festival”* (interview Soth Peosamrang). The festival co-ordinator Song Seng highlighted that the interns framed the festival differently compared to artists owing to their interests as young people. This included a focus on mental health and well-being, human rights, diversity, equality, and social media use, rather than the primary focus being Cambodian culture or national identity; *“If you work with the artists maybe they would not use those words or focus”* (interview, Song Seng). Certainly, the festival programme was unique in terms of its diversity and range, and its rapid turnover of performances. This was a deliberate choice by the interns who found longer performances harder to concentrate on and less interesting. As part of a young TikTok generation, they preferred short pieces that could be easily consumed and which they thought would attract young people into the arts. As a result, no performance was longer than 20 minutes. The interns were concerned with making the festival accessible to people – for example, the workshops on painting, clay making, dancing, and song writing enabled direct engagement with the arts, without pressure or expectation of proficiency. They were open for people to simply try. In addition, the interns even shared their festival description with friends to make sure that it was simple and that they could understand it as young people without experience of the arts.

There are three elements to consider when thinking about the relationship between the interns and the festival as a form of civic participation:

- The first is how the process of curating and producing the festival displayed elements of civic participation or developed skills for this.
- The second is how the festival and its programme promoted active participation in ways that reflect young people and civil society concerns.
- Finally, it is possible to consider the impact of participating in the festival on audiences and volunteers.

Section 3 focuses on the first of these, section 4 focuses on the second and section 5 focuses on the third.



Curating the Festival Programme

The curation and development process promoted elements of civic participation through:

- Learning about the arts
- Implementing and learning skills that assist in civic participation.



Learning about the arts

One of the key things that interns wanted to do through the festival design process was learn more about the arts. They all stated an initial love of arts but felt they would like to know more. As indicated above, sharing knowledge and learning about arts is seen as part of civic participation among young people. This is because the arts are seen as having cultural value to the nation, as perpetuating Cambodian culture and identity, and therefore as being intrinsically connected to society. From their first survey asking them what they hoped to achieve through the process, the interns wanted to learn more about artists' creative process and motivation – including how artists get inspiration, how they connect to society, and how they make their work appealing to audiences. The interns also wanted to learn about the history of art forms and their meaning because they felt they understood something about arts, but not enough. For example, in early meetings where they brainstormed ideas, the interns did not always know the proper terminology or names for different arts. Going through past CLA Cultural Season programmes pushed them in terms of exposure to different forms and highlighted their lack of understanding.

In terms of pre-existing exposure, the interns were more likely to have seen and engaged with Cambodia's traditional performing arts. Their different experiences of, and exposure to, the arts, shaped their initial thoughts and preferences. For example, Lykouryu liked lakhaon niyeay, films and music, Ratanak liked traditional arts owing to the influence of her design teachers, Kamsort liked classical dance, Samnang had the most experience of the arts and had quite a wide range of knowledge. Points of commonality included that they did not fully understand contemporary arts (whether visual or performing arts). The interns also particularly liked lakhaon niyeay (spoken theatre) because it was easy to understand and directly able to touch on social issues and make people think. The interns shared a very strong idea that arts are – or should be – connected to social issues and needs. They stated that the arts were for communicating a message, bringing people together, creating a change in society, and for 'social development' (although this phrase was used loosely):

Arts is a tool to communicate between negative and positive stories, classical and modern and other stories which people can assimilate through seeing, listening and touching it"

(survey response, Kamsort).

Art is one of the most powerful ways to promote social awareness, social issues and advocate for change"

(survey response, Samnang).

Some of the interns also directly expressed that being involved in this process and engaged in the arts was also about being a "good citizen" (survey response, Ratanak) and enabling full participation in society:

I think we're participating in it now (through this internship process) because creating a festival is really significant. It's a huge contribution for youth because we're from four different areas and we're creating a meaningful and impactful festival derived from our combined ideas"

(intern focus group, Kamsort).

However, learning about the arts was not always easy for the interns and by being thrown into an unfamiliar process, they often lacked confidence in their ideas. After the first weekend of meeting together, their immediate responses were that the arts were a lot harder work than they had thought or anticipated. They also did not always follow or understand discussions or what was happening. This was evident in the interns' visual diaries where some of them expressed only speaking when they were certain in their opinions or increasingly felt 'down' because they were not sure what they thought or felt that they simply didn't know enough about the arts. Once we identified this through the research, Tola and

I talked to Seng about it. After our discussion, Tola and Seng made interns more aware of arts events that were happening and encouraged them to attend in order to help broaden their exposure and knowledge (arts events can be difficult to find out about and navigate if you are not following the right people, pages or Telegram channels). The interns periodically did this, and in-person meetings were timed to end with an exhibition visit or similar arts event.

By learning more about arts, the interns reached a deeper level of understanding, both of the arts and themselves as individuals:

I was involved in the arts, but it was in a zone in which there was only me. I didn't expose myself to get to know the artists and the arts environment. [...] I didn't know how I could contribute to the arts and how to develop myself, but I wanted to get close to it first. As I have been a part of this, I slowly learned about the arts. I have started to research about the arts form which I didn't know before. But it was not only about the art pieces. There are some forms of art that I have seen, but I didn't know who created them. There are some artists I just got to know, but I haven't seen their work yet. Through our collective work on selecting pieces for our programmes, I have developed my knowledge to another level"

(interview, Ouk Lykouryu).

Before I only watch the performances for the sake of watching. I didn't look further to see its value. [...] [It was also] getting to know myself better and how I could contribute to the arts"

(interview, Khoeun Kamsort).



The interns described how they also *"became more active in going to see exhibitions, panel discussions and workshops"* (interview Meak Bopharatanak) because of their involvement in creating the festival. Although they learnt about the arts partly through researching CLA's previous Cultural Season performances, the interns felt that they learned and engaged the most when they went to arts events as a group after CLA meetings, or when they talked to artists directly. In the curation and planning phase of the process, artists were invited to present a short talk about festivals or talk to the interns about their art, and later the interns approached artists more directly to ask questions. The interns felt that this kind of direct encounter was more meaningful and engaged them the most fully – that is they preferred the dynamic of being guided, and shaping that guidance in tandem with other people, rather than just independently:

Group discussion and comments we have received from those who have experienced it and those who used to organise events and the artists. The other day, I asked Bong Rady (Nget Rady) about the Moni Mekhala dance. If I didn't ask him, I would just put Moni Mekhala on whatever kind of stage. I didn't know. [...] We always learn from here and there because when we design, we start to feel unsatisfied and find what is appropriate. We question and challenge each other"

(intern focus group, Soth Peosamnang).



Skills for civic participation

The interns had to navigate building a connection as a team and learn how to work across differences. Through this, a key impact of participating in the festival was the use and development of skills that are important to the promotion of civic participation. Skills of compromise, negotiation, understanding, confidence, and leadership (and what that means in a Cambodian context) were all crucial:

I didn't know how to start it [designing a festival]. Then, I learned that we had to choose a theme and look at our social issues. We also have to see whether it meets the needs of our beneficiaries, where are they from, where the festival takes place. We have to have objectives for the festival and we select pieces of work that resonate with our festival objectives. We have our individual programmes, but we have to compromise with one another to choose pieces that fit our beneficiaries needs and our daily theme. That's a new knowledge I've learned. Working as a team is also a new experience"

(focus group, Khoeun Kamsort).

Interns talked about needing to compromise with one another to choose the performances that they wanted and balancing this against the festival theme and the budget. In addition, Song Seng always asked the interns as a group if they had collectively agreed to any decision and told them that *"you have to fight for your ideas. Don't just try to be nice and please others, then you never see your thoughts in that. But it doesn't mean you have to fight without reasons. You have to base it on your own reasons"* (interview Song Seng). In interviews and focus groups, the interns described how it was important that everyone understood the key ideas and direction, even if they followed or implemented one person's idea. This collective and democratic impulse was not always easy to implement, owing to different personalities and preferences. Indeed, Seng also described how he felt unsure when to intervene – it was a new experience for everyone working in this way.

Observing the interns over the months it was clear that some interns were more confident and outspoken than others, some liked to sit and consider things, others liked to be clear in their ideas before expressing them, and some simply did not like to create debates or arguments. In addition, cultural specificities have to be

considered, particularly as the two young women were often quieter and less outspoken. As Ouk Lykouryu said later in interview *"I did not always trust my ideas enough"* and she was concerned about making mistakes. In interviews, interns were also aware that if they had an idea they needed the support of others to implement it and so advocated for ideas that they knew would be supported within the group. The interns were not always able to meet in person, and often met on zoom owing to Kamsort living in Ratanakiri, the difficulty of scheduling in-person meetings, and the cost of meeting every in person in time. Interns found meeting online harder, because there were distractions at home and unreliable internet – particularly for Kamsort. There is a debate to be had around who and how to include those with little experience, and how participation in the arts works in the provinces, or any city outside Phnom Penh. It is important to maintain opportunities such as this for young people in the provinces, but it may be more beneficial in terms of ease of participation and sense of ownership to not mix involvement from young people across Cambodia, but to be more city or province based in terms of youth-led activities. This is because it was easier to facilitate group meetings and tasks in-person.





The interns preferred and requested more in-person meetings, and enjoyed ‘hanging out’ together. They later reflected that they should have done more of this to help strengthen the connection as a team as the process of producing the festival became more stressful, fraught, and disconnected. However, it was noticeable that the interns did become more confident and able to express themselves over time. They tried and explored new ideas. The process of producing the festival allowed for creative self-expression and for the interns to negotiate this in relation to a group – see for example, this discussion of venues:

In our first separated meeting, we had our very first conflict due to the venue (Kamsort: it’s really important.) It’s a three day festival, right? In fact, I was absent when the team discussed having three days. They already decided to do it for three days. I was thinking that it’s too much. I thought two days would be better. After our discussions, we decided to have two and a half. (Samnang: But I thought of having it for two days since the start.) I was thinking that the two-day festival would take place at one place only, but Bong (Samnang) said that four of us need to be responsible for four events at four different venues. In a day, there are events at different venues. I was confused and I didn’t know what to respond. [Samnang: We were not on the same page.] It really took us time to improve ourselves”

(intern focus group, Ouk Lykouryu).

As festival co-ordinator, Seng identified a change in confidence and freedom in the interns that came with their increased ownership of the festival, and in a survey about what skills the interns felt they had used, learned and gained through the process, they identified learning to speak up and voicing opinions as skills they developed, alongside learning from each other and learning from the festival co-ordinators about using skills to make progress. They also wanted to learn more about skills of communication and persuasion, suggesting that unevenness in participation was something that they wanted to improve on.



Interestingly, none of the interns wanted to ‘lead’ the festival, nor did the process encourage one person to take control owing to a focus on collective decision making. Although dominant personalities emerged, those individuals did not view themselves as leaders either. Many of the interns also suggested in the skills survey that leadership skills were something they would have liked to develop through the process, in terms of having clear ideas, communication abilities and co-ordination. Yet they did feel that the process changed them to be more responsible, learn problem solving skills and to be more critical in terms of being able to ‘*see the roots of problems*’ (interview Ouk Lykouryu). Some interns felt that they used their pre-existing skills more than they developed new ones, particularly when they were tasked with using their pre-existing networks to help produce the festival programme (most notably Soth Peosamnang in terms of participants for the fashion show and panellists). Interns also wanted to learn more about resource mobilizing, particularly by finding sponsors and negotiating with them. Budgetary constraints were presented to the interns later in the process after their initial programme was designed, leading to changes, and they did not have enough time at that point to effectively search for alternative sponsorship (although they did work on this). This is perhaps something that could have been presented to them from the start as the interns were interested in this as a transferable skill that would be useful in the social realm.

Participation in The Seven Colours Festival

This section discusses how the festival and its programme promoted active participation and how this relates to civil society. It considers the following dynamics:

- Promotion of the event
- Volunteers
- Diversity and inclusivity in participation, and the ability to create solidarity and harness young people's enthusiasm.

Festival Programme

The first thing to consider in terms of participation is the promotion of the festival and its ability to attract audiences. This was a challenge, and everyone was disappointed with the lower-than-expected turnout. It is hard to ascertain exact audience numbers as people drifted in and out of the events, some people bought tickets, but as a public park area, lots of people joined randomly without paying. There were many events on the festival weekend which potentially led to a drop in audience numbers overall. It is worth noting that CLA requested that the event be moved to coincide with Human Rights Day, and this worked well with the festival theme and objectives, but it potentially split the audience with many other large events. Saturday and Sunday displayed considerably fewer numbers especially for the concert which was disappointing for everyone. However, the opening night was well-attended because many people in the arts community were invited, but beyond this, numbers were relatively small. This does not mean that civic participation was not promoted, but everyone was disappointed in overall numbers and the festival's reach, including the interns:

Even though there were not a lot of audience, those who came got something from our festival. [...] I believe they got something from our events. I think it was somewhat successful. I had huge expectations at first by hoping to have lots of audiences and I originally expected they could get at least 80 percent from the festival [understand and attend 80%]. In reality, we didn't have a big crowd of participants as expected [about 20-30 for the smaller workshops and events]; however, I am happy that they were willing to take part in our event by themselves and they hoped that we could continue the mental health workshops, panel discussion, creative reading and some other performances"

(interview, Meak Bopharatanak).

This quotation also captures the dilemma around quantity and quality of participation in the arts, and by extension, their potential for forging involvement in civic society. However, the festival allowed for deeper more reflective engagement alongside the entertaining exposure to a range of art forms.



In identifying reasons for promotion problems, what came out from interviews across the board, as well as in the lead up to the event, was that the marketing was left too late, and did not seem to have a proper strategy. The reasons for this stem from various factors, including a lull in intern participation and their lack of realisation of the consequences of not completing tasks on time, a lack of budget, a need to bring the main CLA organisational team into the production part of the process late on owing to inexperience and a lack of staffing support, expectations around roles and uncertainty over who was responsible for marketing because the original focus of intern participation was curation and programme design, a lack of communication between interns and CLA staff due to shyness and inexperience (or, the reverse, leading to disagreements), and what was perceived by interns and festival co-ordinators as a lack of 'buy in' when it came to production. In this respect, the structural organisation of the festival needed more consideration from the outset.

Without apportioning blame, and from an outsider perspective, it is noticeable that there was considerable marketing and engagement at the

start of the process (such as video interviews with the interns on Facebook) but there was virtually no content like this towards the end, other than what the interns tried to create themselves and via their own networks at the last minute. Placing the interns to work with CLA staffing in teams gave them direct experience of those roles within a CLA framework, essentially working as a "shadowing" experience and potentially allowed for greater exchange of ideas between young people and existing CLA organisational operations. The interns took the lead on certain things that they identified with and over time developed those responsibilities. However, it also removed some of their control and there were struggles over this. The interns took the lead on certain things that they identified with and over time developed those responsibilities. However, it also removed some of their control and there were discussions about this in terms of working practices and the structure of events. Some interns had strong ideas about how events should be organised which contrasted with the ideas or experience of CLA staff and other group members. This highlighted the difficulty of having an equal sense of participation and control over the event.



In interviews conducted after the festival, the interns reflected on how other events, such as CLA's Cultural Season or the Cambodia Book Fair posted information and publicity a month in advance. In contrast, this festival did not always have Facebook event links created in time, and content about the festival, including speakers and events were posted too late (e.g. on the last day). As such, drawing young people into the event to participate became limited – but equally it was not unsuccessful. Audiences we spoke to found out about the event primarily from Facebook, through the Seven Colours Festival page (which received paid promotion), the CLA Telegram Group, other artists or arts events that shared information about the event, as well as through personal networks of friends and colleagues. Song Seng, the festival co-ordinator, also admitted in interview that he needed the younger interns and CLA staff to help him communicate with younger pop artists as this was not a world he was familiar with:

One of the things is about contacting pop singers. When they mentioned those names, it sounded very new to me because I am not familiar with them. I don't know anything about the young singers. To have those singers to involve in our programmes was my biggest challenge. That's why I needed help from our intern. Samnang knows many of them. Then I go to him and ask if he can help, he said it's no worries. Luckily, our [CLA] colleague, also has a very good connection with people in that sector. Finally we have them with us."

Song also supported the interns in exploring new avenues for publicity at the last minute, giving them freedom to create a TikTok account (which generated 2000 views in the 2 days before opening). The interns also had several very different and imaginative ideas for generating and appealing to new young audiences – such as asking ten people in their own networks to create a video about the event, asking influencers or content creators to spread the word about the festival, and the performers also posted about the festival on their own pages. The difficulty was simply that this came too late in the process.

Volunteers

Volunteering is a key activity for engaging young people in society and contributing to a broader feeling of civic responsibility and social good. The open request for volunteers for the festival through Facebook was hugely successful with over 400 applications – the largest CLA has ever received, partly thanks to promotion in a Facebook Group called Opportunities. This illustrates the appetite for opportunities to engage in civil society among young people. Although it was the first time some young people had volunteered for an event, many had been volunteers before at a range of events, including school events, technology development events, helping visiting medics, Victory Day celebrations or the SEA Games. From our vox pop interviews,

many just wanted volunteering experience, but the youth and arts focus of the festival was particularly appealing to them. They nearly all wanted greater exposure to the arts or displayed an interest in arts because it was new to them. Again, volunteer recruitment and assignment to particular teams related to the overall festival production occurred fairly late in the process. Interns were pleased with the involvement of volunteers but sometimes highlighted that they turned up late (or not at all) and did not always help set up in the way hoped. In this respect, they wished that they had more 'bonding' time to get to know the volunteers and enable them to really engage with the festival and its objectives:

All the people involved should have time to get to know each other before starting to work. For me, I could get to know only two volunteers who worked closely with me"

(interview, Khoeun Kamsort).

I also wanted to get ideas from the volunteers. As they came to support us in organizing, they had a lot of ideas that could help us to do it better. [...] If we had time, or if they could get more training, I think they could have done better. I think that would have impacted our festival in a positive way because we would have incorporated ideas of young people from the outside. They would also feel the festival was their own festival too, they were not just helpers"

(interview, Ouk Lykouryu).

The interns all wanted the volunteers to be fully engaged in the festival and to feel that it was for them in a way that promoted meaningful and in-depth participation. In reality, not all volunteers necessarily wanted or desired that experience, but as discussed below, this did not mean that the festival did not impact upon them.



Diversity and equality of participation

In this regard, the interns were concerned with making sure that audiences found it easy to participate in the festival – they designed it to promote active participation as described above. Returning to the key ideas around civic participation identified in our earlier research, they also took diversity and equality of participation into account, although this was not always successfully implemented. In many respects, the festival did an excellent job of trying to bring diverse groups together in ways that reflected the interests and concerns of young people and promoted open spaces for expressing ideas and having discussion. There are many examples of this, such as the message tree. Here, audiences (particularly after workshops) were encouraged to write what they wanted to see in 5 years' time in relation to arts and social development and then tie their message to one of the park trees. Audiences left 77 messages where they described a range of ideas but expressed a strong desire to see Cambodian arts internationally, emphasised the need to share, preserve and spread knowledge about arts and culture, hoped for greater inclusion/inclusivity in the arts, a wealthier and more democratic society, and wanted to see the arts more valued in general. This can be seen in a sample of the following comments:

“What I want to see: Cambodian people understand about this ancient culture; the youth continuing to learn about the arts; giving it value as much as the music/songs; getting support as equal as the concerts.”

“I want to see the dance, music, songs and films become well known in the neighboring country”

“We have to continue walking forward and struggle regardless of the countless challenges we face. I want to see all the sectors grow in Cambodia. I want to see the country has/ practice democratic system in the next five years. I want to have a better salary.”

“As a youth, I think that to help contribute to the development of the Cambodian arts and cultural sector, it requires the engagement of all the people from different classes and needs us to promote our ancestral heritages to other people.”

“The activities that contribute to the development of the culture and art sector can be from posting and sharing on social media and supporting it through watching and buying [cultural] materials.”

“I want to see new creativity in Khmer arts and culture- I want these to have meanings and ideas for driving social development.”

It was very clear from these messages that the perpetuation of the arts, social development, and their interconnection was seen as a collective social project that required everyone's involvement.



Young people were also encouraged to be part of the festival through an open-call photo competition on the theme of ‘youth and the past’ that was promoted via the event’s Facebook page. This was specifically for young amateur photographers from across Cambodia. The interns chose the finalists, and their pictures were placed on the Facebook page as well as being exhibited as part of the festival alongside photographs from two invited photographers. Audiences could then vote for their favourite photograph via likes/shares, via a QR code which was printed under the exhibited photos, or by leaving their vote and feedback in a locked box. This gave young people not only the ability to participate and show their talents in a large event (something that was important for the contestants from the provinces) but also the ability to show their preferences through different voting mechanisms. Votes across the

different mechanisms were combined and a winner announced, with a small monetary prize. The top 3 photographs are on the right (p59), with the winner *Warm Family* by Sut Sochily obtaining 1451 votes overall. The photographs, and their captions, are interesting for how they reflect the different concerns of young people, expressing the cultural importance of family and family as role models, the desire for collective connection across differences within society, and the importance of past arts and culture for building a new future – particularly in a globalised world. From written notes and vox pops with audiences who were looking at the photographs, we also know that many young people found that the photographs made them think of their childhood – largely because young people featured heavily in the images – but also made them appreciate the diversity of Cambodia and its landscapes.



Warm Family

“In general, all the youth and people always have childhood past of living in a warm family. Before we could build up a family, we have to face lots of issues. But this image reflects that the parents have to be the models and to give warmth to children even if the family condition is not well off.”

Sut Sochily, Kandal Province

We are one

“The sky is the same as the scene of our past while the thread is an art that connects one person to another; no matter if they’re male or female, old or young. This scenery is like our whole nation that requires us to be in solidarity, to move forward together and to live with one another with kinship.”

Ou Banung, Phnom Penh

Preserving Heritage:

Youth Architecture Students Learn about New Khmer Architecture

“New Khmer Architecture was a symbol of Cambodia’s newfound independence and its desire to modernize. The movement was a blend of traditional Khmer architecture and modern international styles, celebrating Cambodia’s rich cultural heritage. The photo captures a moment where young students are excited and intrigued learning about their local heritage looking at the Royal University of Phnom Penh’s Institute of Foreign Language Building.”

This photo is a reminder of the importance of educating young people about their cultural heritage. It is also a celebration of the youth who are taking the time to learn about and preserve New Khmer Architecture, showcasing they are learning about the past so that they can build a better future for Cambodia.”

Mak Molrithiruth, Phnom Penh



គ្រួសារក្នុងរាត្រី
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In addition to the photographic competition, the interns selected 4 acts (a classical dance, a contemporary dance, a rap and a chapei performance) from an open call talent competition announcement, again promoted through the event Facebook page, CLA Facebook page, and other arts networks. However, whilst this was meant to be a talent show that enabled young and emerging artists

to perform, there was no competitive element to it. So, the opportunities to interact with the audiences and choose a ‘winner’ was reduced, but interns wanted to equally value the different forms of art presented, and not choose between them. This was especially important as one of the impacts of being involved in the process for the interns was learning about and valuing the diversity of art, not just certain forms of art:

Before I thought that the classical dance had more value compared to other dance. No matter if it's painting, film, writing or other things, all form of arts have equal value and unique meaning. It taught me to value the arts equally"

(Khoeun Kamsort).

The talent show contestants, like those who wrote on the message tree, were often concerned with keeping arts alive by performing and showcasing their talents as well as through teaching and learning the arts. However, they also wanted to encourage young people to be courageous, stand up for what they believed and be inspired to run their own events or be motivated:

Showing talents can boost the courage of young people and youth can show their talents. [...] I hope that youth who have talents can join in the festivals in the coming future because it's really good for them to build connections with each other, with teachers and other artists which can create a bigger community"

(Ry MoniPanha, rapper).

Others would feel motivated when seeing this youth activity and feel amazed by the courage of the event organizer. Some people may feel inspired to run events on their own"

(So Saron, chapei player).

In this respect, the desire to promote arts and national culture co-existed alongside the idea that it was important to use arts to **create solidarity, address social issues and harness the potential of young people** specifically for the improvement of society in general. So Saron, for example, used chapei to sing about social issues such as domestic violence, drug issues and gambling. Rith Daro's contemporary dance group (Krishna Rak) performed a piece called 'Dear G' (Dear Girls) about violence and abuse against women and young people, challenging cultural norms that tend to apportion blame to women when relationships fail, or when they are raped:

I learned about it from social media. I saw a lot of comments related to children and women abuse. For example, an old man raped a small girl. At first, the little girl was scared of him. But that old man kept giving her toys until she trusted him. Then he raped the little girl. But people didn't blame that man, but the little girl. They said that it's her fault. They talked about how she dressed or she was too inviting. We wanted to change that perspective through our piece. If she meets that kind of issue, we should help to support her and clean all the dark marks on her. [...] Through our piece, we narrated that the colours of the human are the same as the rainbow colours, we are beautiful in our own ways, but what would happen if there's a dark mark on our colour? We wanted to tell our audience about the situation of a person who experiences that, she keeps herself isolated and faces that pain. Some people even decide to commit suicide"

(Rith Daro, dancer).

In this respect, arts were seen as intrinsically connected to society and used to reflect on social issues faced by young people – but also to produce a supportive society that would encourage, rather than blame. Each of the artists hoped to use the arts to promote what young people viewed as progressive forms of social change (including the greater valuation of traditional arts) through both traditional and contemporary art forms.

One of the key events through which diversity and participation were established was through a fashion show led by the drag queen JC Kween called “I am.... and I believe.” Here, ten individuals from different under-represented groups were invited to partake in a catwalk show where they dressed as they wished, stated who they were and claimed ownership of their identity to the sound of the song *This is Me* from *The Greatest Showman*. This included individuals with disabilities and mental health issues, indigenous groups, Muslim women, female factory workers, women who had been bullied for how they dressed, and LGBTQ individuals. Some of their statements included:

I'm Dareach. I believe that the same-sex marriages (of the LGBT) will be legalised in Cambodia soon.

My name is Teyphors. I hope that all women have the right to wear whatever styles they want without being discriminated against or humiliated (especially Muslim women) at work or in the public.

I'm Sana. I believe that all factory workers will have lots of work to do and have decent salaries to survive and to support their families. I hope that they can work in an environment that provides support and a clear supportive system.

This was moving for many young people and was inspiring and powerful to watch as a direct statement of inclusivity and diversity.

However, there were also challenges with promoting equal participation in practice. Firstly, finding an appropriate venue that could accommodate the diverse programme and that was also affordable and accessible was challenging. Coconut Park had upstairs rooms that could only be reached by stairs, and some workshops were held there, particularly those on dance. Originally all workshops were meant to take place in the main park, but problems with communication and co-ordination meant that the talent show performers were rehearsing on the mainstage when workshops were meant to occur. As a result, the dance workshops, where music was needed, were moved upstairs at the last minute. This left some disabled participants unable to attend and therefore disappointed and feeling excluded – something the interns were aware of, unhappy about, but could not fully resolve. The interns were concerned as well about the venue being in a more elite area – even though it was close to the city (Koh Pich) – and about other elements that, on later reflection, they viewed as expensive, such as the cost of the noodle stall, which meant that people left the festival when they were hungry later in the evening, rather than staying.



The Impact of Participating in the Festival for Audiences

The final sphere in which it is possible to consider the festival in terms of civic participation among young people is to consider the impact that being involved in this process had on the interns, volunteers and the audiences who attended. It covers:

- Debates over quantity and quality of participation.
- Learning more about arts.
- Creating connection and community across difference.



I asked my friends and they said they had never seen Medha Women Drummers, contemporary dance and Skor Pok before. For Skor Thon specifically, they said they never saw it. They saw only pop concerts and classical music. They mentioned that they were appreciative and happy that they could see all those performances”

(Interview, Meak Bopharatanak).

Quantity and quality of participation

A key point to consider is the kinds of participation enabled (or not) by the festival and how it might be possible to evaluate its success. It raises the question of what kinds of civic participation the arts may be able to foster in this context. Responses and values here will inevitably be impacted by the different positions of respondents - is successful participation based on audience numbers? Or audience clicks or likes? How meaningful is this – and does this matter? Is successful civic participation based on the ability to foster critical thinking, or the creation of a feeling of community or ownership? Which elements are most valuable? Although the interns received a stipend, they did considerable work that went beyond this. In this respect, ‘volunteer’ framings of participation used in the sphere of civil society can potentially lead to a devaluing of the arts and those involved with them. Much research and practical work on arts, civic participation and

social development values the arts for how they may be used in activism or for how they show alternative imaginations of society – however, this cannot be assumed, and the relationship between art and the social realm is more nuanced. This is particularly because audiences are unpredictable, have different experiences, and can take varied messages from events.

In considering issues of quantity and quality of participation, it is worth highlighting that sometimes young people attended simply to enjoy the arts as entertainment. Audiences enjoyed the festival programme, they liked to see different art forms brought together, they thought the diversity on offer was *“impressive”* and accessible; *“It’s not too messy, not too difficult to participate in, and not too complicated”* (audience vox pops). In some respects, therefore, the festival enabled exposure as a form of participation:



Some audience members highlighted that it was difficult to see performances other than through large, televised events and they wanted to see more live performances, and more of a mix. This is especially prominent given that Cambodia has recently hosted large events, like the SEA Games, where culture has been made very visible through televised opening and closing ceremonies.

However, it is not necessarily the case that simply watching performances was superficial and workshops led to greater depth of participation. For example, one volunteer who watched the performances stated; *“this festival inspired me deeply. I could see new forms of arts, especially seeing the performance of artists from the provinces”* (vox pop, volunteer). The performances and events presented often promoted progressive ideas that young people found inspiring, particularly around diversity, equality and rights. For example, SilverBelle’s contemporary dance Freedom offered commentary on the social position of women, with a female dancer initially performing as a puppet at the control of her male partner, before finally breaking free and expressing herself – although the piece could perhaps also be read as a commentary on freedom of expression in society in general. Audiences recognised these elements of performances and were inspired by them, particularly the Medha women drummers because it is rare to see female drummers as historically it has been a cultural taboo for women to touch drums:

The drummers – remind us not to give up on your dreams as a woman, even if you have children”

(audience vox pop).

Several audiences described how they were amazed or “shook” (audience vox pop) by this performance and its power. Similarly, the workshop on mental health was very successful and many participants, as well as Seng Song, found it unique and helpful:

“It’s my first time to host a workshop on mental health related to the arts. It was very interesting to hear speakers and participants sharing their experiences. I think that is really important and I personally think that should be happening more than just one time”

(interview, Song Seng).

Audiences wanted to see more events on this topic in future, they felt that they learned more about mental health in a positive way. They found it helpful “learning techniques on how to take care of oneself” (audience vox pop) and to keep motivated.

In addition, many audience vox pops, tree messages and volunteer vox pops described how simply attending the arts was a form of participation and promotion, because it led them to be more interested in the arts and attendance itself supported artists:

We need to share, preserve and spread knowledge about arts and culture so that it lasts. I want to see more sharing and attendance, more involvement. Attending, volunteering, writing about and promoting writing about arts. But in general, promotion through social media (message tree response).

Promotion through social media sharing about events was also regularly seen in audience and volunteer vox pops as an important way of participating in the arts, owing to spreading information and raising awareness about arts events. Respondents said they would “make more time” (audience vox pops) for the arts, even if only a little bit, but that they had a different idea about arts and the value of arts because they attended the festival. As such exposure to the arts enabled immediate and potentially also future participation.



Learning about the arts

In thinking further about the impacts of participation, it is worth highlighting that across the board – from audiences to interns, the festival helped many young people to learn more about the arts. Indeed, this was a key reason why volunteers applied to help – they wanted more exposure, to find out more about arts, admitting that “even arts students don’t have a well-rounded knowledge of arts” (volunteer vox pop). Several audiences and volunteers (and one of the interns), commented on how they had not seen a staged reading before. They had seen Lakhaon Niyeay (spoken theatre) but not a staged reading. After the staged reading of Son, Look at that Beautiful Rainbow an audience member explicitly asked what the difference was in the Q&A, using the opportunity of interacting with artists to find out more for themselves (and by extension, everyone).



Creating connection and community across difference

Another important way in which the festival created spaces for civic participation in ways that impacted on young people was through its focus on connection and community across difference. In the panel discussions, particularly on young people, arts and social development, the range of speakers from diverse backgrounds (including from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) inspired young people to recognise the importance of arts and cultural preservation:

I was inspired by those working in the arts sector not to give up cultural heritage and to promote/preserve it. The arts can awaken the consciousness of young people, preventing them from forgetting Khmer national identity, which our ancestors strived to preserve. When they participate, they are able to understand and realize, even if in my case, I didn't study or understand much about it before, but after attending, I recognized the significance and the need"

(vox pop, workshop participant).

Some audience members valued the Ministry perspective and viewed this as the 'correct' response – particularly regarding the promotion of Cambodian culture and identity. Although more experienced arts-goers said that such discussions were *"typical but valuable"* (audience vox pop) they appreciated the emphasis on thinking critically for young people in relation to the arts and their purpose. However, it is also important to note that several audiences felt that the festival created a 'safe space' where people could hold multiple views:

For me, what I enjoy most is that I can see that our young Cambodians have their own ideas, like they can express themselves and speak in public. It could be a starting point for our Cambodians to be able to stand on the international stage by speaking out in public without fear. Whatever they want to say, they can say it here"

(audience, vox pop).

This event makes me feel no pressure. I can speak without fear even though opinions cannot always be expressed in some places. But here, after I speak, I feel like someone is listening. The most important thing for an individual is to be heard"

(audience, vox pop).

Audiences did not feel they were being judged and were happy to learn more about other people's perspectives. In this respect, a government view about the role of arts, culture and national development or pride was present and engaged with, but it was one voice among many thoughtful and reflective contributions. In this respect, the festival created a space for civic participation between artists and audiences, one that enabled them to think meaningfully about the role of arts in society. It was, as one audience member put it, *"cultivating consciousness"* (audience vox pop) – that is to say, audiences felt that the festival raised issues that young people should think about and be concerned by, enabled them to learn and gain knowledge, whilst also raising topics that reflected current youth concerns. This is reinforced by how several audiences and volunteers in vox pops commented on how *"everyone feels united"* (audience vox pop) and young people could *"connect with one another"* (audience vox pop), highlighting how participation in arts created a sense of connection and community that encompassed difference and diversity.



Summary Findings And Recommendations



This study provides the first in-depth discussion of how the arts may relate to the sphere of civil society, and how to engage young people in this process. Through a focus on the process of curating and producing the 7 Colours Festival in December 2023, it has enabled a detailed focus on how involving young people in the arts can promote core elements of civic participation through skills of negotiation and decision making, the creation of dialogue across diversity, the promotion of volunteering and collective ownership, and a consideration of the different ways of engaging young people in the arts (e.g. through learning, watching, hands-on involvement in activities, the provision of activities for self-expression, social media voting). It has also examined the tensions around these activities and processes, highlighting difficulties of collective 'buy in' and group dynamics, as well as a lack of clear goals surrounding the type of participation desired or needed, and how this may vary across groups (beyond young people in general). The research also explored the nuances around civic participation, particularly discussions of quality or quantity, and the different ways in which the arts may connect to society as a result.

On one level, the festival and the artistic activities it presented directly connected to the sphere of civil society through the festival's purpose, and the subsequent programming choices that were made. The interns explicitly chose performances, staged or creative readings, that addressed issues in society that were of interest to them as young people and that conveyed their core values of diversity and equality. This ranged from performances addressing women's right to equality and self-expression, LGBTQ acceptance, online bullying, and the consequences of drink driving. The interns also created a programme that, in general, enabled diverse groups to participate, express themselves, and be represented, particularly in the drag-queen led fashion show. At times there were activities and performances like this that directly expressed the desire for equal rights, particularly for women. Activities such as collectively singing the UN Sustainable Development Goals song, meaningful discussions on arts and social development, and arts and mental health, also allowed the festival to produce collective and shared experiences that were valuable in the civic realm. Importantly, the festival was able to create a shared and safe space where different opinions could be voiced without judgement. In this regard, it is important to note that whilst many discussions about the arts in Cambodia are framed in relation to government discourses of nationality and identity, this was only one perspective among many presented at the festival. In fact, the Seven Colours Festival successfully reframed artistic encounters and discussions because it was so directly engaged with young people's concerns in civil society and operated at one remove from government.

In addition, the festival programme allowed for different modes of participation, from simply having fun learning how to dance or paint, whilst also being exposed to more meaningful and deeper discussions about the connection between art and society. The short, interactive set up of the programme was viewed as engaging and accessible by audiences and provided an entry point for finding out more about the arts and social issues important to youth. However, it cannot be assumed that lots of people watching performances was a less meaningful mode of participating in civil society compared to fewer people taking part in a hands-on workshop. Young people viewed learning about arts as important for culture, society and national identity, and exposure to different art forms fed their curiosity. Seeing new performances also inspired young people to think about social issues and perhaps may lead them to further arts and civic society activities. Indeed, the interns and volunteers were all young people wanting to have new experiences, wanting to make a difference and contribute in some way. The festival encouraged them further with this, particularly in relation to the arts. Making clay pots, writing songs and painting was also engaging and allowed young people to simply express themselves creatively, perhaps in ways they had not done so before. In this respect, not all forms of participation connected the arts to civil society but did allow young people to express themselves – and this variation also made the festival interesting and fun. In addition, the calls for the photography competition and talent competition enabled anyone to submit an entry, and voting, sharing, and discussing are all collective activities necessary to promote a healthy civil society sphere.



The festival therefore promoted skills needed for civic participation, particularly for the interns, who had to practice negotiation, compromise, diplomacy, respect and collective responsibility. There were issues over leadership, and difficulties in creating 'buy in' between the interns and CLA, reflecting inequalities in age, experience,

and perhaps power. Yet the interns were given a lot of freedom in decision making that allowed them to take collective ownership of the event, despite budgetary constraints that also curbed their ambitions. Debates and disagreements that emerged can also be seen as the reflection of a much bigger question outlined at the start around

whose responsibility it is to promote and engage young people in the arts, in what ways, and to what ends. Audiences in the festival often suggested it was the responsibility of young people themselves to find out more, support the arts and share information about it. Yet not everyone engaged in the same way (late volunteers, for example)

but the interns were consistently concerned with trying to be inclusive and open, even if this was not always successful. One lingering question is whether events such as this promote one-off or long-term engagement in the arts and civil society, but certainly, there is an appetite among young people for this kind of participatory activity.

Recommendations

- The festival became a bigger event than perhaps anyone imagined or could manage. More consideration could be given to the type of event created, and to the steps needed to facilitate the engagement of interns.
- Clearer expectations on what the desired outcomes might be, and the type of participation fostered, would have helped structure the overall process and created 'buy in' from everyone. Better benchmarks of what constitutes success would strengthen the focus of the programme and evaluation of its success – for example, is successful participation based on audience numbers or depth and detail of knowledge? What does successful participation look like for different groups (e.g. interns, volunteers, CLA staff, audiences)?
- Group composition needs more consideration – particularly keeping it more local to foster better engagement and participation. However, the provinces should not be overlooked. It may have been better to give this experience to young arts entrepreneurs who already have some knowledge and experience but who could have used the festival to develop their skills and capacities in the sector. Alternatively, a mixed group of artists and non-artists would foster new collaborations, ideas and ways of working - because the interns came up with different and successful ideas for connecting arts with social issues, engaging young people, and reflecting young people's concerns in civil society.
- A more structured training programme about the arts would give interns a stronger orientation and enable them to make decisions more effectively. More direct participation in the arts is needed for those without that strong background. Meeting and connecting in person worked best in moving the festival development forward, for sharing knowledge and experience, and for discussing ideas. The interns suggested that this should be more regularly maintained to foster group cohesion or "team spirit".
- The interns learned a lot about the arts, developed new skills and connected the arts to social issues. However, the type of participation created was varied and there is a balance between quality and quantity of participation with civil society issues.
- Participation can involve increasing understanding and awareness of key issues faced by young people, and the festival used arts to do this. The festival was also very successful in developing skills and promoting safe spaces of dialogue with a diversity of voices.
- What are the expectations and the limitations placed on arts – should they promote advocacy? This may not be possible in the current context (for example, the interns retracted their idea to involve human rights organisations more directly. After reflecting on it, they felt it would not be safe for them, the organisations, or the artists).
- Greater budget, better media engagement, and new promotion methods (e.g. reaching out to social influencers, using young people to create and share content) should be considered. Everyone in the festival team commented on the difficulty of getting artists to perform for the amount that was available and that this was not congruent with valuing artists' time.
- It is unclear where the interns go from here – the process built their capacities in some respects but not others. This group was quite active in volunteering, so is it 'another', slightly bigger role on their CVs? This process did not build capacity in the arts sector, nor fully encourage that sector to really think about the connection between arts and social development beyond as audience consumers. However, the interns had new ideas and created sharing knowledge/exchange programmes that were interesting for the sector.
- Interns suggested a more fellowship or work placement would be better where they were placed in the CLA offices and paid appropriately for a set period of work (e.g. 3 afternoons a week). They felt this would encourage greater sharing and facilitation of the festival objectives with CLA staff. It also suggested greater recognition of the amount of work that was involved and appropriate remuneration.



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