

# COLORS OF CONNECTION

## Why Colors of Connection Engages Conflict-Affected Youth and Their Communities Through Art

There is compelling evidence that involvement in the arts has the unique capacity to heal the mind and body and is necessary for the full development of individuals and communities.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”<sup>1</sup> Colors of Connection aims to expand access to this critical right to participation in cultural life and the enjoyment of the arts. (UN, 1949).

By drawing on the unique power of the arts, CC uses art as an intervention tool among youth and conflict-affected communities.

Below, we describe some of the key benefits that we think are worth highlighting related to our arts-based intervention approach, including the ways in which art can be a tool to facilitate (a) holistic healing; (b) expression and communication; (c) personal and community agency; d) relationship-building; e) deeper thought and reflexivity.

### **a) Holistic healing**

- **Art as a determinant of health:** Engagement in the arts is shown to have a number of positive effects on mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health. (MacNaughton, White, & Stacy, 2005) Indeed, art itself is argued to be a determinant of health, and is recognized as being involved in direct healing via processes such as: visual art therapy, drama therapy, movement therapy, and music therapy. (Lander & Graham-Pole, 2008)
- **Healing from trauma:** Engagement in creative activities reconnects a traumatized person to their emotions, thoughts, and their physical body, and allows them to reframe the trauma and approach it in a less rigid way. (Huss, Elhozayel, & Marcus, 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (1948). Universal declaration of human rights. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>



## b) Expression and communication

- **Age-appropriate mediums for emotional expression:** Creating art enables individuals to express and channel their emotions in an easier and more direct way. Particularly for adolescents experiencing transition and a desire for independence, it establishes a safe and private space for them, while helping them to connect to, define, or refine their values as they process their emotions. (Rockefeller, 1977) (Johnson, 1990).
- **Communication on a larger scale:** Artistic expression can serve as a platform and voice for individuals and communities to address issues that are important to them. Public art allows underdeveloped and disadvantaged communities to collaboratively and creatively disseminate significant ideas within the communities themselves as well as with the world through technological media.
- **Communication and understanding new perspectives:** 'Reading' in the arts, as Eisner refers to it, can allow for individuals and communities to digest and communicate information differently, and to experience their world in ways that they had not known how to experience previously (Eisner, 2008)
- **Knowledge-sharing with diverse audiences:** Communication through the arts has the ability to transcend language and cultural barriers, and can be more accessible to audiences from a broad range of educational backgrounds, age groups, cultures, geographic regions, and roles in society. (Wheeler, 2012)
- **Communicating and evoking solidarity:** Expression through the arts has an ability to generate solidarity in a way that is distinct from any other form of communication. (Weber, 2008) This ability does not relate exclusively to the personal level; indeed, the arts can effectively blur lines between the personal and political.

## c) Personal and community agency

- **Personal agency:** Engaging in the arts can build motivation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Youth who participate in CC projects are required to take an active role in the process, which enhances their sense of self and their belief in their ability to direct their lives. (Fliegel, 2000)
- **Community Agency:** Artistic engagement can empower communities and build capacity for positive action. Community engagement in the arts has been described as an empowering process for participants (Barndt, 2008) which can lead them to take action to address community-based issues more cohesively (Goodwin & Shapiro) and with more confidence. (Israel, Schultz, Parker & Becker, 2005)



- **Promoting civic engagement.** Through participation in creating public arts, youth become engaged in improving their community, which creates a feeling of belonging and ownership of one's community and thus promotes further civic engagement. (Guetzkow, 2002)

#### d) Relationship-building

- **Building social capital:** The arts can facilitate the building of social connections and relationships. Specifically, the act of participating in art-making, working collaboratively with a shared focus, and working together in neutral spaces have been shown to positively impact relationship-building. (Barndt, 2008)
- **Promoting positive behaviour that can increase positive social interactions:** Creative activities enable at-risk youth to break out of past negative behavior and gain the chance to interact with the world in a new and positive way, which then positively influences their social interactions. (Gussak, 2007)
- **Facilitating positive interaction with peers:** Youth who experience the challenges of shyness, anxiety, depression, and anger are able to build positive relationships with peers more easily within the social constructs of a designed program where their artistic expressions and skills provide an alternate way for them to communicate and to gain recognition among their peers. (Guetzkow).

#### e) Deeper thought and reflexivity

- **Facilitating reflexivity and critical social analysis:** Community arts strategies require dedication and commitment to the collective exploration, identification, negotiation, and expression of a particular topic of relevance to the community. Power dynamics – shaped by local, national, and international political agendas, social contexts, and economic restraints – inevitably impact the ways in which each community decides to identify, frame, and express a topic of focus. Additionally, shared visions about *what* should happen and *why* will likely differ among participants, and between participants and the project leader/research facilitator. During a community arts process, participants will be encouraged to enter into a reflexive process within which they can actively, visibly, and viscerally, reflect on the social conditions of their lives, agency, root political causes of war and disease, perceived roles in society, and power dynamics (Barndt, 2008). In other words, participants can work collaboratively to identify topics of interest through active reflection on their experiences in the world (as they have come to know it).



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