

# PARTICIPATORY PERFORMING ARTS

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CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN  
FOUNDATION

UK BRANCH

## SUMMARISING OUR APPROACH

## The **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch)**

aspires to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing, particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries which deliver social, cultural and environmental value. We have a long-standing record of significant interventions in the arts in the UK with groundbreaking work in relation to the arts in schools and communities.

## Why is this strand of work needed?

There is strong evidence that participating in performing arts brings social benefits such as new skills and knowledge, richer social networks and the confidence to engage with and contribute to society. This is all the more important for people who may otherwise be disadvantaged or marginalised. There is much innovation and experimentation in work with vulnerable or underserved groups but practice is fragmented, hampering the exchange of information and the sharing of resources. Participatory arts practice also faces challenges: people can be sceptical of its artistic merit and the financial crisis has hit grant funding hard but new opportunities are opening up with a marked change in expectations and new technologies that are blurring the line between professional performer, participant and audience.

## What change are we seeking to achieve?

Our long-term aim is to see participatory performing arts practice become more mainstream. With this work, we want to:

- show that participatory practice does not compromise artistic quality;
- demonstrate the value of participatory practice to arts organisations, artists, funders, critics and audiences;
- develop a strong community of practice/ learning;
- improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities who are vulnerable and/or underserved;
- place a particular emphasis on homeless people (who often have multiple and complex needs) and older people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, loneliness and isolation.

We recognise that there are lessons to be gained from working with particular groups that can be applied to working with others and approaches in other countries which we can learn from.

# 20%

The most vulnerable groups are over 20% less likely to participate in creative or cultural activity than those who are least deprived

Countries with higher levels of cultural engagement also have higher levels of social and institutional trust

## What questions are we seeking to address?

We want to identify models of best practice and originality in participatory and socially engaged performing arts.

We want to find what works in:

- creating collaborations and exchange of learning across different sectors and organisational forms and across the performing arts and national boundaries;
- giving a voice to vulnerable or under-served groups, profiling their talents and enabling them to engage with and contribute to society;
- developing new forms of finance that enable work with social impact to be sustained, scaled and replicated.

## How will we know we are successful?

Broadly, we hope to see:

- an evidence base of what works in supporting and promoting participatory practice;
- a self-sustaining community of practice, sharing learning and forming networks;
- funders, arts organisations, artists, critics and audiences taking participatory arts seriously;
- people who are usually not included in finding a voice through participatory arts.

We will collect and share information about progress through evaluation and learning, developing appropriate measures of success as the work develops. We will explore how best to ensure a legacy for our work.

## What approaches will we deploy?

We seek with this work to innovate, build capacity, create cross-boundary collaborations and catalyse change in both the arts funding system and the practice of arts organisations. Acting as a broker and convener, as well as a funder, we are looking to:

- identify ground-breaking models, supporting research and development projects (that meet certain criteria), backing a range of projects through to full production, examining which approaches are most effective in enhancing wellbeing;
- support exchange of practice and the development of networks between arts practitioners within the UK and internationally;
- improve the evidence base through commissioning research and evaluations, convening a community of practice and organising events to share learning;
- support the development of innovative finance models.

We will also consider how we can help create the conditions for change by engaging with policy-makers to influence the assumptions that guide public expenditure.

## What projects are we already supporting in this field?

We are already engaged with:

- collaborations, like those between: Battersea Arts Centre, Manchester's Contact Theatre and Rio's *Agencia de Redes Para Juventude*; the Royal Opera House and Streetwise Opera; and National Theatre of Scotland's major new project which will connect communities across Commonwealth countries in a cultural exchange;
- explorations of new models of practice such as: Brazilian models for supporting small-scale arts practice in communities; amateur groups alongside established arts organisations through a project with the Sacred Sounds Women's Choir and the Manchester International Festival;
- exploring how networks, including those on a global scale, can help in sharing good practice, sustain and scale work (this includes an international network of arts and homelessness inspired by a project originally developed by Streetwise Opera);
- research and development (possibly leading to production) with Duckie in Vauxhall.

# 38%

Participation in a creative or cultural activity is generally associated with a higher level of subjective wellbeing: participants were 38% more likely to report good health

Evidence shows that participation in the arts contributes to community cohesion, reducing social exclusion and isolation, and making communities feel safer and stronger

# 32%

In response to the statement 'the arts is not for people like me', 32% of those with the lowest household income agreed

Participatory arts are an effective way to tackle loneliness amongst older people

## Who do we need to work with to achieve change?

We want to work with different organisations nationally and internationally, including:

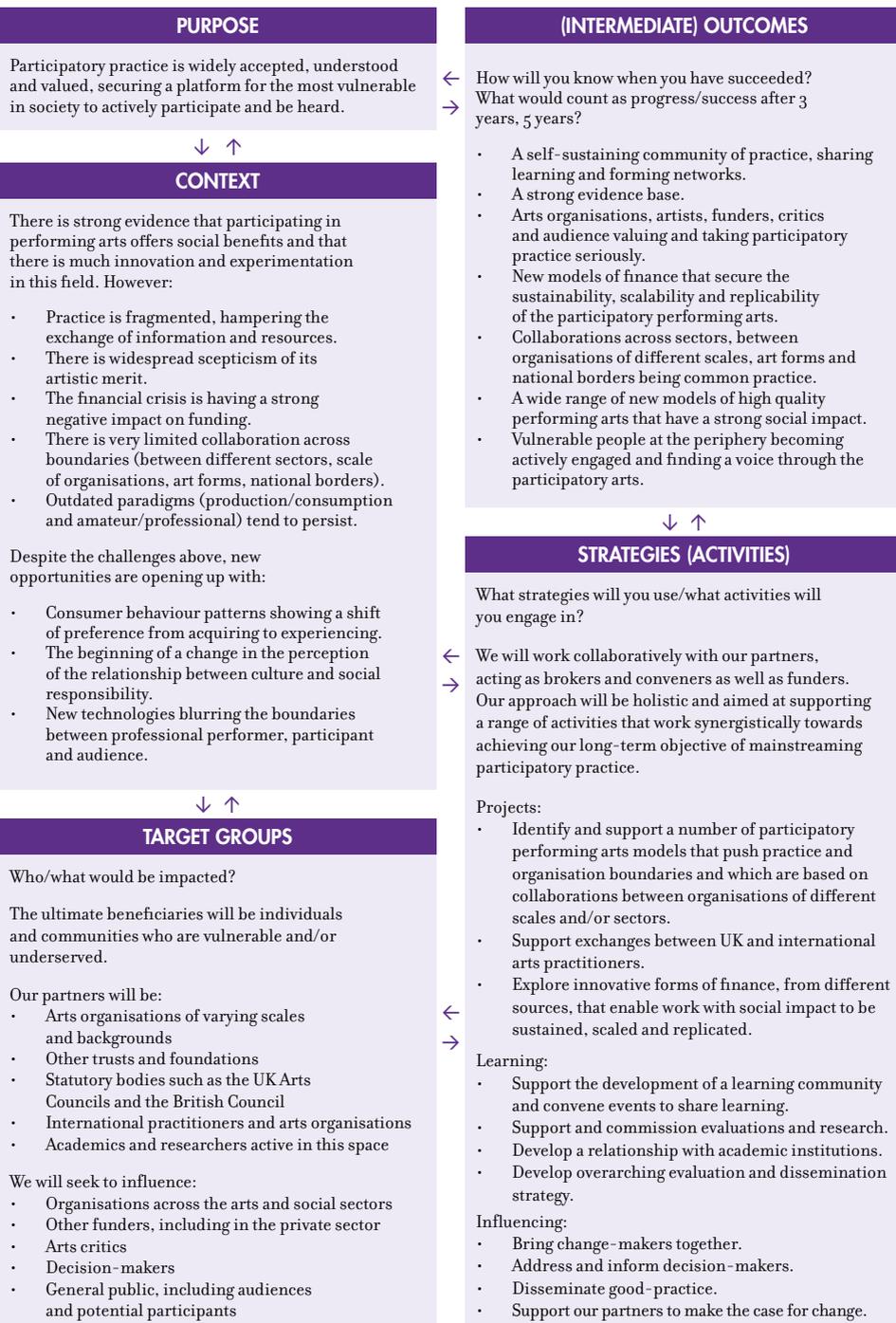
- arts organisations of varying scales and backgrounds;
- representatives of other trusts and foundations and other stakeholders;
- other funders, including the British Council and the UK Arts Councils;
- international practitioners, especially those with strong traditions in research or training artists;
- academics with an interest in the field.

## What will we do next?

We have already made an open call for expressions of interest to help us develop our knowledge of the issues. We held a networking event with arts organisations that responded to the call in order to identify collaborations that we might support and selected some of these to take to full production. Our other priorities will be to identify practitioners in the UK and other countries to work with an international exchange and to explore new funding models.

We expect to invest up to £2.5 million in this work up to 2019. For more information, contact Isabel Lucena (email: [ilucena@gulbenkian.org.uk](mailto:ilucena@gulbenkian.org.uk)).

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