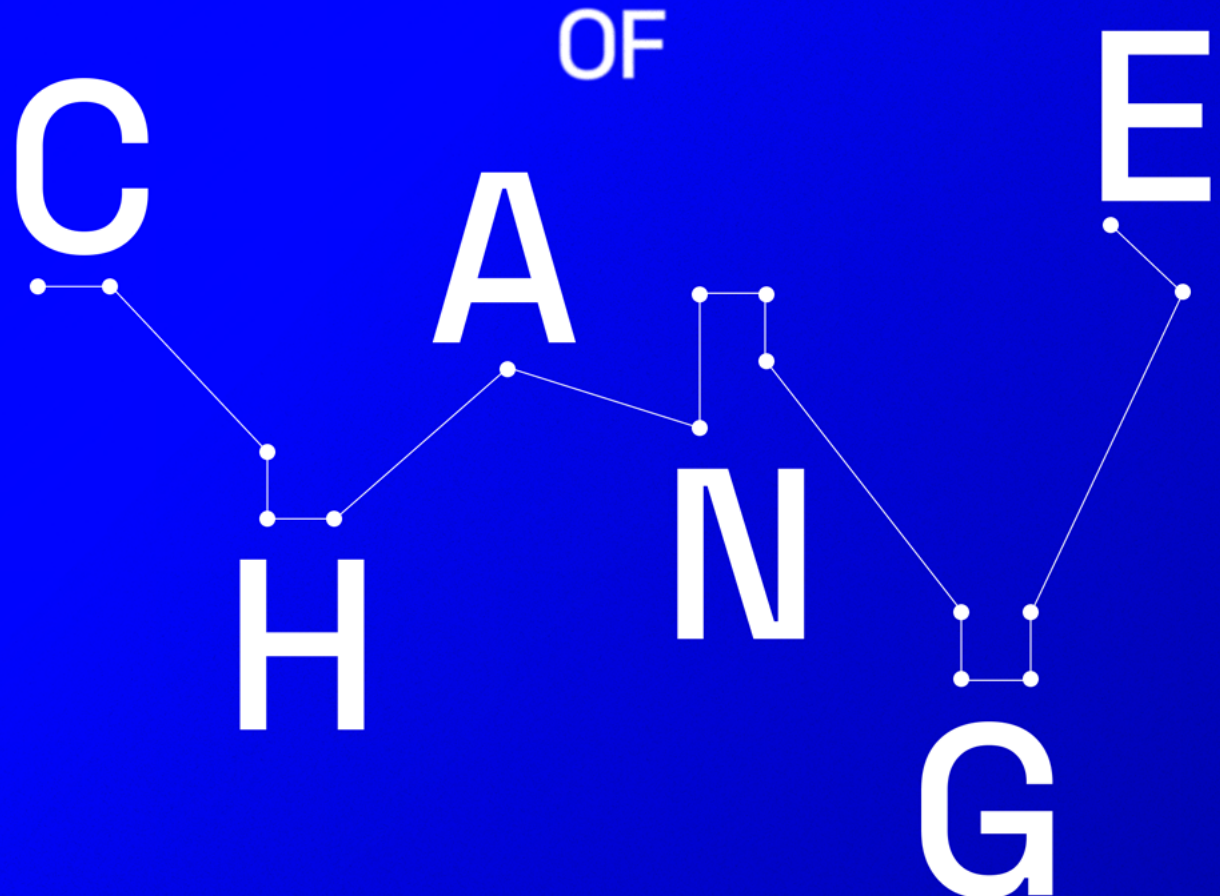


Alliance for

Socially
Engaged
Arts

CONSTELLATIONS OF C A N G H N E



SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS
ORGANISATIONS ACROSS EUROPE



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ABOUT THE ALLIANCE FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

The Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts brings together leading European philanthropic foundations to champion the power of socially engaged arts in driving positive social change across Europe. By connecting and elevating organisations and practitioners, and providing them with essential skills and resources, the Alliance works towards a Europe where community engagement and creative collaboration sit at the heart of the arts sector, fostering social progress for all. The Alliance is hosted by the Network of European Foundations.

The Alliance responds to the persistent undervaluation of socially engaged arts, which often lack sufficient policy recognition and funding despite their societal impact. Guided by its mission to “connect, create, and change,” it advocates for greater visibility, investment, and structural support, aiming to transform public and policy awareness of the field. Ultimately, it envisions a future where socially engaged arts are widely recognised as a powerful driver of social change and a key force in shaping a fairer and more creative Europe.

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FOREWORD

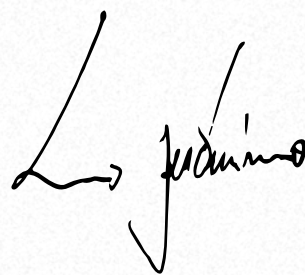
There is a quiet urgency at the heart of socially engaged arts — a sense that the work happening across Europe is not just valuable, but vital. This report was commissioned by the Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts to bring that work into view: to understand it, to celebrate it, and to ensure it is recognised and supported at every level.

The timing of this research is no accident. Across communities, cities, and countries, socially engaged arts are addressing social isolation, inequality, and civic disconnection — challenges that have only intensified in recent years. And yet, despite the transformative power of this work, it often remains invisible in cultural policies, funding priorities, and wider public awareness. Without clear insight and recognition, the risk is real: that a key field we rely on to strengthen communities and build social resilience is left under-resourced, undervalued, and unsupported.

This report is meant for everyone who cares about the role of arts in society. For practitioners, it reflects the diversity, creativity, and dedication of a growing sector. For policymakers and funders, it provides evidence, context, and clarity to inform better decisions and strategies. For advocates, it is a tool for amplifying voices, highlighting impact, and making the case for investment. And for communities themselves, it is a reminder that their lived experiences and collaborations with artists are central to shaping a more inclusive and resilient Europe.

At the Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts, our mission is simple: to champion socially engaged arts as a force for meaningful social change. Guided by values of inclusion, collaboration, and impact, we bring together funders, practitioners, and advocates to strengthen the field, connect voices across borders, and ensure that creativity meets social need with ambition and care.

This report aims to be more than a snapshot of the socially engaged arts field; we hope it will be a strong starting point to discuss the relevance of this work and the need to find better solutions for this field of practice to thrive. Together, we can ensure that socially engaged arts are not a marginal practice, but a core part of the cultural and civic life of Europe.



LUÍS JERÓNIMO

Chair of the Alliance for
Socially Engaged Arts
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible through the contributions, collaboration, and support of many individuals and organisations across Europe. We are especially grateful to the organisations, artists, practitioners, academics, funders and experts who shared their time, experiences, and insights throughout the research process. Their perspectives are at the heart of this work, and those who contributed directly through our survey, interviews and webinar events are named in [Contributors to the Report](#). We hope we have done their contributions justice.

Many thanks to Madeleine McGirk at the International Teaching Artists Collaborative, Anis Barnat at the Community Arts Network, Klaus Fruchtnis Duran at the Carasso Foundation, Paola Sabbione at the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, and Krista Petäjärvi at the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture who facilitated introductions with organisations and practitioners in their respective contexts and networks. Thanks also to all the organisations and individuals who shared the call for survey responses and webinar invitations — their efforts enabled us to engage over 300 organisations and practitioners in shaping the report and its findings.

We are grateful to all the research partners and report authors who were essential in the design, analysis, and presentation of material included throughout this report. Thanks also to Vid Tratnik, Duna Viezzoli and Simone Decolle for their support in producing the two public webinar events.

The research process and publication were overseen by Daniela Nofal at the Alliance for Socially Engaged Arts, without whose sector-based knowledge, kindness and firm steer, this report would not have been possible. The detailed feedback and sharp insights of the Alliance partner foundations were also fundamental to the report's evolution, with special thanks to Luís Correia for his astute editorial and expert support.

The report's design and layout were produced by Natalie Hancock at Concat Tech. The draft was proofread by Silke Rosemary Pranzetti, and Conor Reidy at Silver View Editing. Finally, sincere thanks to the contributors who agreed to the inclusion of their images, works and materials throughout this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Socially engaged arts (SEA) work through artistic processes to connect people with their innate sense of creativity, making art with communities rather than for or about them. They create opportunities for people to feel seen and heard, enabling them to express their needs and activate practical and imaginative capacities to envision and realise alternative futures in the face of personal, collective and systemic challenges.

SEA practices are not peripheral to the challenges of our time, but essential to addressing them. At a moment defined by deepening inequality, democratic fragmentation, ecological crisis and widespread social disconnection, SEA organisations work consistently with communities over time, often where institutional trust has broken down, to co-create community-rooted knowledge, leadership and problem-solving that conventional systems frequently fail to recognise or support. They often base themselves in communities that have been historically underrepresented or actively marginalised socially and politically, and through a spectrum of participatory and collaborative artistic processes, they enable people to move from isolation and powerlessness toward belonging, agency and civic action.

Increasingly, SEA organisations are engaging directly with “wicked” social challenges such as migration, climate change, public health inequity and democratic disengagement — challenges that require collaborative approaches that transverse sectors, policy areas, expertise and dimensions of change simultaneously. Their role as facilitators and mediators between a wider ecosystem of stakeholders offers precisely this capacity. They create spaces where communities can work alongside the wider ecosystem of social and environmental services, artists, SEA networks, academics, funders, policymakers and public institutions, to think laterally, identify leverage points for systemic transformation and inhabit new identities and narratives that birth new possibilities. It is precisely the combination

of artistic process with social mission that enables this depth of intervention.

The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that the impacts of SEA extend far beyond cultural participation or individual wellbeing outcomes. SEA practices cultivate the social infrastructures required for long-term systemic change: trust, reciprocity, democratic participation and the capacity to navigate complexity collaboratively.

The recommendations set out in this report, therefore, represent more than a case for increased support for the arts. They outline an opportunity to strengthen the civic, democratic and imaginative capacities urgently needed in this historic moment. Failure to act risks overlooking one of the few fields already demonstrating practical, community-based approaches to resilience, participation and systemic transformation under conditions of profound uncertainty. At a time when institutions across society are searching for ways to rebuild trust and respond to complexity, SEA offer vital imaginative and civic infrastructure.

This report examines organisations dedicated to SEA practices as key reference points for the field, given their role as mediators between communities, artists, public institutions, research centres, funders and policymakers. It identifies the characteristics and operating realities of SEA organisations across the Council of Europe area and makes recommendations for the development and recognition of a field growing in influence and potential.

METHODOLOGY

The findings are based on a variety of sources: an anonymised database of 887 applications to the Alliance’s Fellowship programme in 2025, a survey of 274 SEA organisations, interviews and focus groups with 20 organisations, two interactive webinars with over 150 SEA organisations, and extensive desk research.

TERMINOLOGY

“Socially engaged arts” is an umbrella term that encompasses many participatory and co-creative approaches to making art collectively, guided by a social purpose. While it is important to acknowledge the diversity of language and artistic practice that shapes SEA practice, this fragmentation has affected the consistent acknowledgement and standardisation of SEA in policymaking, the translation of policies into funding frameworks. To overcome this and create the conditions for more coherent advocacy and field-building, we have used “socially engaged arts” (SEA) to describe all activity that falls under this umbrella.

SEA organisations are embedded within the arts and culture but also extend into other social and environmental sectors through partnership and collaboration. Given the transversal nature of SEA work and impact, we have therefore chosen to refer to them as a “**field of practice**” that works fluidly across multiple sectors and domains.

KEY FINDINGS

1

SEA is a growing field, and the majority of SEA organisations are grassroots, small and horizontally-governed non-profit associations with modest budgets.

New entrants identifying specifically as SEA organisations have been increasing steadily since the late 1990s. This coincides with the conceptualisation of SEA as a practice in scholarship, as well as increasing recognition in policy, integration into mainstream arts programming, and the formation of the Alliance — all indicating a field growing in influence. Many organisations emerge from artist- and/or community-led initiatives which formalise to gain access to funding, collaboration and recognition, but operate with limited resources, exposing a need for capacity building, more sustainable funding models, and clearer professional recognition to safeguard SEA practitioners from expectations beyond the domain of arts expertise.

2

SEA is an interdisciplinary field, combining multiple artforms, participatory methodologies and cross-sector collaboration in response to community needs and desires.

This transversal way of working positions SEA organisations as relevant partners in the delivery of social policy, democratic innovation and frontline public services, as well as contributing to the democratisation of culture by shifting power to communities to determine their cultural lives.

3

Artists are key actors in the field and play multiple roles in SEA organisations,

as leaders, artistic collaborators, board members and researchers. Alongside communities, they are crucial to the intellectual, artistic and political development of the field.

4

Communities are involved at all levels of SEA activity.

85% of surveyed organisations co-create artistic work with communities, and 38% on average involve communities in organisational governance. There is a shift from communities participating in arts activity to becoming co-decision makers — and even initiators of activity — at all levels of the process.

5

SEA interventions create more than isolated social impacts: they create the conditions for social change on multiple levels.

The artistic process at the heart of SEA activity inherently enables both personal and collective wellbeing, learning and agency. SEA processes prioritise quality of relationship, creating safe spaces that encourage self-expression and dialogue that restore trust, belonging and meaningful relationships that are crucial to rebuilding social infrastructure damaged by polarisation, discrimination and declining trust in public institutions. By mediating between different stakeholders, SEA organisations connect communities with public services, local authorities, cultural spaces, policymakers, and funders to create the conditions for systemic transformation that departs from the lived experience of people typically excluded from public decision-making. This capacity to simultaneously create impact across these different levels is called complex social impact.

6

The complex social impact created by SEA activity builds community resilience and creates the conditions for systemic change.

In the context of a deepening polycrisis, SEA organisations are increasingly playing a systemic role: their embeddedness in communities extends beyond funding cycles, and their function is moving beyond the production of cultural value to enabling social, civic and ecological systems to function and adapt. They catalyse change at multiple levels: personal, relational and structural, meaning that they create the conditions for systemic change that addresses the root causes of social and environmental challenges.

7

The complex social impact that SEA organisations create is not being captured adequately within current impact-based evaluation frameworks.

Across the SEA field, stakeholders agree that SEA practice aligns with and is currently delivering against local and global sustainable development goals. Practitioners, academics, policymakers, and funders emphasise the need for creativity to address complex social challenges — both for radical, interdisciplinary problem-solving and to empower individuals and communities to co-create social realities that uphold wellbeing, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and economic stability, but the complex social impacts that evidence SEA achieving this social change are not adequately captured using pre-determined evaluation approaches. Research tells us that qualitative, embedded evaluation methodologies that are community- and context-specific and funded as part of the activity, best capture SEA impact and empower SEA organisations to learn and evolve their impact in communities.

Often, this benefits from collaborations between SEA organisations and researchers that capture impact during SEA activity rather than end-of-project reporting. The majority of SEA organisations see evaluation as a means to improve and foster a learning culture within their organisations and communities, rather than an accountability exercise, suggesting a great receptivity to collaboration with funders to evolve more nuanced and appropriate approaches.

8

There is a persistent gap between policy and implementation.

Transnational and national policy increasingly acknowledges the power of participatory arts to create change, but these policy intentions rarely get translated into implementation strategies and funding frameworks, preventing SEA organisations from benefiting from policies that endorse their value.

9

There is an unequal distribution of funding for SEA organisations across Europe, and they are often falling in the gap between social and arts funding.

SEA organisations operate across multiple policy domains without being fully anchored in any. The same practice may be framed as cultural production, social intervention, or public health activity depending on the funding context. While this flexibility enables cross-sectoral work, it also places SEA organisations in a structurally marginal position between cultural and social funding systems. They are often neither prioritised within arts funding nor fully integrated into social service provision. As it stands, the SEA funding landscape is characterised by a highly diverse matrix of public and private sources rather than a unified and equitable European funding landscape. Access to funding is overwhelmingly the field's biggest challenge, specifically multi-year, sustainable funding that enables organisations to break out of a project-by-project cycle that can keep them from capacity building and growth.

10

Political and socio-economic instability threatens SEA work,

from funding cuts and audiences suffering from economic austerity, to corruption, political censorship and threats in authoritarian contexts. Despite this, SEA organisations often actively hold spaces for resistance and critical thinking in these contexts, making them even more vulnerable to harmful consequences. This tension calls for solidarity movements that can support SEA organisations operating in precarity.

TRENDS AND FUTURES

As SEA organisations evolve in response to interconnected social, political, economic, and ecological challenges and increasing pressure on public systems, they are shifting from short-term interventions to an emphasis on long-term, place-based practices embedded in communities. They are increasingly playing a mediating role, connecting people, institutions, and different sectors to collaborate, reflecting a deeper transition from SEA organisations primarily producing cultural outputs to building and maintaining social conditions — trust, relationships, belonging, and collective capacity — that enable communities to function and adapt over time.

The role of the artist is also changing. Practitioners are increasingly operating as hybrid figures — facilitators, mediators, organisers, caregivers, and system stewards — working across health, education, governance, and environmental contexts. As a result, SEA is no longer confined to the cultural sector but is becoming a distributed practice embedded across public life and multiple institutional domains.

SEA interventions are increasingly iterative and embedded, designed for continuity rather than fixed project cycles, and shaped by conditions of permanent adaptation. A parallel ecological shift is also expanding the field beyond human-centred frameworks toward recognition of interdependence between social and environmental systems.

Across the [five emerging future scenarios](#) outlined in this report, a central question for the field emerges: whether SEA is recognised and resourced as a core form of public infrastructure, or continues to operate primarily as a grassroots, compensatory and adaptive response to systemic gaps. The field's place-based and community-rooted nature presents a significant opportunity for policy implementation and amplifying the systemic shift already emerging towards citizen-led democracy and governance in the face of complexity. The scale at which it is able to realise this potential will largely be determined by the willingness of policymakers and funders to work hand in hand with organisations and practitioners as collaborators, to navigate rapidly shifting contexts and challenges. The recommendations outlined here offer starting points for this horizontal collaboration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing together the insights from this research, we have identified key recommendations that can best address the needs of SEA organisations to thrive, and their potential to contribute to the social transformation that is necessary to enable healthy, thriving local people and places. All systemic actors addressed in this report — policymakers, funders, academics and organisations — have a role in realising the following cross-cutting recommendations, which are organised under five key pillars for SEA advocacy: **Recognise, Resource, Embed, Measure** and **Connect**.

[Specific recommendations](#) for local, national and internationally-focused policymakers and funders are provided at the end of the full report.

RECOGNISE**1**

Advocate for a clear and shared definition of SEA that can inform existing and future policy coherence. The definition and framework of common principles in this report can serve as a starting point.

2

Name SEA explicitly in policies, funding programmes, research and advocacy. Group participatory and community-led arts activity under the SEA umbrella, to standardise and create coherence across policies and frameworks.

3

Recognise the transversal, cross-sectoral and systemic potential of SEA. Shape policies that acknowledge the specific ways SEA practices contribute to social change, valuing the transversal and systemic ways that creative expression and cultural rights enable multiple levels of personal and social transformation.

4

Recognise the hybrid roles SEA artists play (artist, mediator, facilitator) and strengthen the conditions for them to work safely and effectively, including fair payment, adequate time to work with communities, social protection systems, access to professional development and a specific job category to enable the recognition of SEA artists in national monitoring and statistics.

RESOURCE**5**

Close the policy–action gap by aligning policies that outline the potential of participatory, community-led artistic activity with implementation planning that translates intentions into tangible opportunities for the field to expand its influence.

6

Diversify funding logic to shift from short-term project funding to multi-year, trust-based funding that targets the various needs and stages of SEA development and community collaboration. Balance support across different ecosystem actors and roles.

7

Provide capacity-building infrastructure. Support the professionalisation of SEA organisations and practitioners, and the transference of SEA methodologies into the wider cultural sector. Support intermediaries (hubs, labs, platforms, networks) that independently monitor and advocate for the sustainability and quality of SEA practices, supporting individuals, organisations and communities to network, develop collaborations and projects, identify funding and resources, identify and access capacity-building opportunities.

EMBED

8

Embed SEA in social policy. Integrate SEA transversally across all areas of social and environmental development (for example, into health, education, environment, youth, migration, and urban development strategies). Treat SEA and cultural participation as core social infrastructure, not as an additional or “nice-to-have” activity alongside frontline social services. Encourage collaboration between social services and SEA organisations to enhance public service delivery and innovation.

9

Collaborate with SEA organisations and communities through participatory governance structures to shape policy, funding programmes and criteria. Treat organisations and communities as critical friends and collaborators who hold insight and channel community-based collective intelligence.

MEASURE

10

Redefine “cultural participation” from audiences consuming culture to participation as a spectrum of different ways of engaging with, shaping and co-creating culture. Make sure this is reflected in the monitoring of cultural participation at all levels, so that the data and evidence-based evidence around SEA participation at scale can be built alongside standard cultural participation metrics.

11

Co-create context-specific SEA evaluation frameworks and metrics with SEA organisations and communities that prioritise process-based impacts rather than final outputs. Adapt frameworks to respond to local contexts and the lived experience of communities. Identify context-specific metrics in dialogue with community members and favour qualitative, iterative evaluation models that are embedded in the artistic process to measure complex social impact.

CONNECT

12

Network the field and encourage collaboration between SEA organisations and wider social and cultural sectors. Connect across existing local and international networks to create more field-level exchange and coherence, and level the field between organisations, funders and policymakers to enable multi-stakeholder co-creative processes that can address policy-action gaps and create infrastructures that build on the strengths of SEA practices, rather than their ability to deliver specific and siloed social outcomes.

13

Create alliances with SEA academics and research institutes to build evaluation, research and knowledge creation partnerships, and stay informed on best practices and emerging theories. Work together to identify pathways and priorities for field-building research that can address some of the recommendations in this report, as well as local, national and international knowledge that can inform narratives to cement the social impact and understanding of SEA practice.

HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS REPORT

This report brings together **research**, **insights**, and **recommendations** on socially engaged arts across Europe.

Use this guide to move directly to the sections most relevant to your work, interests, or role.



INTRODUCTION

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS IN A CHANGING EUROPE

Europe is navigating a period of interconnected economic, social, political, and environmental pressures that collectively constitute a polycrisis. Structural challenges such as demographic shifts, rising inequalities, technological change, and climate impacts are testing the resilience of established systems, while dominant neoliberal paradigms — prioritising growth, market liberalisation, and extractive approaches — have contributed to social fragmentation, environmental degradation, and declining public investment in culture. In this context, participatory and deliberative democratic models and innovations are emerging alongside new regenerative social, economic, and civic models that indicate a broader, often place-based, transition toward new ways of organising society that emphasise collective intelligence, social cohesion, and sustainable futures.

Socially Engaged Arts (SEA) operate within this transitional space, offering an arts-based approach to addressing social challenges grounded in creativity, relational wellbeing, inclusion, and social justice. They combine artistic practice and facilitation to create safe spaces for co-creation, dialogue, and sense-making. In doing so, they rebuild social infrastructure under strain from economic crises, isolation, and polarisation, creating opportunities for people often excluded from political life to feel seen, heard and capable of being agents of change in their communities.

SEA practices challenge existing vertical power dynamics by experimenting with trust-based, reciprocal and horizontal models. They simultaneously generate aesthetic, social, and civic value that enable change across multiple social impact areas, while creating the conditions for societal transformation.

Understanding the landscape of SEA across Europe is therefore not only a matter of mapping artistic and cultural practices. It is also a way of understanding how communities are responding to a period of systemic transformation through arts and creativity.

While recognition of SEA practices and their impact remain poor overall, challenged by fragmented terminology and subsequently a lack of SEA-specific monitoring at the national or European level, headway is being made. UNESCO's 4th edition of *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity* report (2026) emphasises culture not only as economic activity but as a driver of social cohesion — especially given rising polycrises, clearly recognising the specific value of SEA contributions to social life. The report also identifies a policy-action gap between recognising the potential of culture to enable sustainable development and the existence of tangible mechanisms for supporting and enabling arts organisations to realise this potential. This calls for a systemic shift from supporting culture as an economic sector to enabling culture as a participatory, socially embedded public good — with governance, funding and measurement systems redesigned accordingly.

This report aims to support this by developing understanding of SEA organisations and how they operate, the impact they are capable of creating, and potential pathways towards more empowered, networked and impactful futures for the field.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This research maps the state of SEA organisations in the Council of Europe area and Kosovo¹. It focuses on organisations as connectors, reference points and vehicles for enabling access to resources and longer-term engagement in communities. Given the extent and diversity of SEA organisations and the wider field, our mapping is a first step towards articulating themes, trends, unifying values, principles and trajectories that can give the SEA field shape and recognition, opening pathways for further research and ongoing advocacy and narrative building. As such, we have aimed to:

- Propose a **definition of the field** which feels true to its diversity, interdisciplinary nature, and constant evolution following.

- Contextualise SEA** within the social, economic, political and environmental trends shaping Europe.

- Build an **understanding of the operating realities of SEA organisations** across the Council of Europe (with more detail available in the [Supplement to this report](#)).

- Articulate the nature of **SEA practices, their impact and their relationship to the wider socio-political contexts** they emerge from.

- Understand how SEA organisations **relate to wider funding and policymaking** infrastructure within and beyond the arts and cultural landscape.

- Identify trends** shaping the SEA field's present and future possibilities.

- Propose **recommendations** for ongoing field-building, funding, policymaking and advocacy.

- Illustrate all of this through **stories of SEA practice** that demonstrate how they work and the diversity of SEA contributions to society.

To gain an understanding of their operating realities and how SEA organisations relate to the wider field, we have also spoken to academics, support organisations and individual practitioners to better understand the dynamics and relationships that are crucial to organisational existence and wider field-building.

¹This is the region across which the Alliance operates. All future mentions of "Europe" in this report refer to this geographical area, unless otherwise specified. The 46 member states of the Council of Europe are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Republic of Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

METHODOLOGY

The foundations for this research were built through:

- A comprehensive desk review of the history of SEA in Europe; current practices, case studies, relevant reports and academic literature; and policies and funding frameworks that support or intersect with SEA practice in the Council of Europe, conducted December 2025 to March 2026.
- Anonymised data gathered through 887 applications received in February 2025 by the Alliance for its Fellowship programme.
- Evidence collected through 283 responses (of which 274 valid/complete replies) to an online survey open to SEA organisations from the Council of Europe area, conducted December 2025 to January 2026.
- A series of 13 interviews with SEA organisational leaders, academics and SEA experts conducted January to March 2026.
- Two focus groups: one with SEA organisations from the Baltic region (three organisations) and one with SEA organisations from the Western Balkans (four organisations).
- Two interactive webinars involving over 150 SEA organisations and practitioners also contributed to our creation of the SEA Framework of Operating Principles and our understanding of trends shaping the field's future.
- Multiple feedback sessions with the members of the commissioning body, the Alliance.

The full list of participants of the interviews, focus groups, survey and webinars is listed under [Contributors to the Report](#).

The integrated database of application and survey data comprises responses from 1,128 organisations across 39 different countries out of the 46 European member states in the Council of Europe and Kosovo. The data set includes organisations where SEA activity constitutes 100% of their work, as well as arts and cultural organisations that also present other artistic forms, but at least 50% of their programme is focused on SEA practices.

LIMITATIONS

Geographical Diversity of Survey and Application Data

The majority of contributors to our data set are based in the United Kingdom (24.9%), followed by Italy (15.6%), Spain (7.4%), Germany (6.6%), France (5.1%), Belgium (4.9%), Portugal (4.4%), and the Netherlands (4.3%). Respondents from Switzerland, Greece, Austria, Turkey, Romania, Ireland, Poland, and Hungary each represent between 1.0% and 3.6% of the total, and the remaining 21 countries individually represent less than 1% each of total respondents.

Table 1: List of countries grouped by region

Area	Countries
Caucasus	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia
Central Europe	Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia
Eastern Europe	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine
Northern Europe	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden
Southern Europe (Mediterranean)	Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Türkiye
Western Europe	Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Western Europe has the greatest representation (51%), followed by Southern Europe (32.2%), Central Europe (7.1%), Eastern Europe (5.1%), and Northern Europe (3.5%). The least represented area is the Caucasus, accounting for 1.1% of responses.

To balance out the lack of perspective from under-represented regions, interviews and desk research were focused on these regions, where possible, to gather more insight and ensure that the conclusions summarised in this report feel representative overall.

Use of AI-Assisted Software

Part of the textual analysis for this research was conducted with the assistance of an AI-assisted qualitative data analysis software. This allowed for a systematic pre-structuring of textual material, the identification of recurrent themes, semantic patterns and discursive clusters and a more rapid comparison across cases. It also enabled us to translate and integrate linguistic diversity in the survey responses and analysis. To mitigate the ethical and environmental concerns around the use of AI, it was used sparingly and all data processed through AI-supported software was fully anonymised prior to upload. The AI software we used is not publicly searchable, and all data is securely stored.

Limitations to the Scope

The research was conducted over the span of four months, and as such, what we present here does not claim to offer an exhaustive picture of the SEA field, but reflects the salient and recurring features that emerged from the sample of organisations we analysed and the supporting desk research. As mentioned earlier, the mandate of the research is focused on organisations, not individual artists and practitioners, though their crucial role is acknowledged in relation to SEA organisations. The research also does not cover social enterprises or charities working through art-based methods that do not identify as arts organisations.

Language and Format

The survey, interviews and webinars were carried out using English as the working language. While this was a practical choice, we are aware that it may have failed to reach or discouraged participation from SEA organisations that do not have staff who feel comfortable communicating in English. All activities took place online, and it is possible that some organisations less connected to online networks did not become aware of the research in time.

DEFINING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

GENEALOGY AND HISTORY OF THE FIELD

The emergence of SEA as a field of practice is intertwined with historical upheavals, processes of democratisation, collective memory and social movements.

While SEA as a term emerged in the later twentieth century, the relationship between art, society and governance originated much earlier, with deep roots in the transformations brought about since the Enlightenment period.² The philosophical debates of the Enlightenment reshaped the status of art in European societies. In the nineteenth century, Europe's industrial elites faced growing urban populations and rising political tensions, and many philanthropists invested in cultural institutions as part of a broader strategy to promote social cohesion and moral improvement. Public museums, libraries, concert halls and galleries were established across Europe with the declared aims of educating and civilising the population, where art and culture were used to shape people's experience of citizenship and norms of behaviour. Art became a powerful marker of distinction, anticipating what Pierre Bourdieu would later theorise as cultural capital.³ Access to high culture was framed as a path to moral refinement and social stability, but this civilising mission carried an inherently conservative logic: personal improvement was encouraged insofar as it reinforced existing social hierarchies. This model later evolved into what would be called cultural democratisation, the extension of access to established cultural forms to wider segments of the population, without fundamentally questioning who defines cultural value.

Against the backdrop of this top-down civilisation project, bottom-up models of vibrant cultural self-organisation emerged, with a notable example being the Salford Lyceum in the UK in 1839.⁴ Skilled workers created their own libraries, institutes and associations, asserting not only a right to education but also to cultural self-determination. Although the term did not yet exist, these movements embodied the principles of cultural democracy, the idea that people have the right not only to access culture but to create and shape it according to their own values and experiences.

In the early twentieth century, European artistic avant-gardes — including Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, and later Situationist International — challenged institutions and social norms through collective, anti-institutional gestures, and merged art with political critique and everyday life, working through direct engagement and *dérive* practices that subverted urban routines, laying the ground for SEA practices.

The 1960s and 1970s were transformative for European art and politics. Artistic experimentation intersected with social upheavals, fostering community-based practices and politically motivated interventions. Transnational movements — from US civil rights to anti-colonial struggles and the Vietnam War — inspired artists to address social justice. Women's liberation movements across Europe influenced art to engage with gender, labour, and social equity issues.⁵ The 1968 French student uprisings, workers' strikes, and critiques of institutional authority challenged traditional power structures. In Italy and Germany, leftist student and feminist movements encouraged engagement with communities, gender, and labour issues.

² Matarasso, F. (2022, August 5). Cultural Policy in a Post-Political Age v.2. A Restless Art. <https://arestlessart.com/writing/old-words/cultural-policy-in-a-post-political-age/>

³ Bourdieu, Pierre. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Eds.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

⁴ Cowan, I. R. (1968). Mechanics' institutes and science and art classes in Salford in the nineteenth century. *The Vocational Aspect of Secondary and Further Education*, 20(47), 201-210.

⁵ Wark, J. & Jones, A. (1998). *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. University of Minnesota Press.

Avant-garde art across Europe shifted from object to process, embracing collective work and participatory performance, supported increasingly by policies encouraging collaboration with marginalised groups.⁶

Globally and in Europe, the term “community art” grew in this period to describe artistic projects grounded in communities, often responding to economic injustice, civil rights struggles and grassroots organising. While more prominent in Anglo-American and Nordic regions, through these initiatives artists began to see communities as collaborators rather than audiences or observers of the artistic process.

In the 1980s, German artist Joseph Beuys theorised art as a social practice capable of shaping society itself. His concept of “social sculpture” built on community art to lay the foundation for co-creative and collaborative artmaking, proposing that “every human being is an artist,” and that society could become a collective artwork shaped through creative action and democratic participation. This was also the period in which “Brazilian Outreach Arts” began to spread across Europe, which operated according to a similar vision. Notably, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed gained popularity in Europe, inspiring the creation of many SEA organisations working in community theatre, education, social justice activism, and rehabilitation and empowerment for previously incarcerated, homeless and other marginalised groups.⁷

The late twentieth century was marked by structural socio-economic shifts and political change across Europe, from neoliberal reforms to the end of the Cold War. After the fall of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, artists in Central and Eastern

Europe engaged with the transition from state socialism to market economies and EU integration. The rise of neoliberal urban policies and market-oriented cultural industries catalysed practices that used art to address gentrification, displacement and civic rights. Research later framed these interventions that contested the impact of global capital on urban life and community space as SEA.⁸

In this period, SEA practices also took on post-traumatic, inter-ethnic and civic functions in societies still wrestling with the legacies of conflict and transition. The violent break-up of Yugoslavia produced landscape-scale trauma, ethnic displacement, and contested narratives of violence. In these contexts, SEA practices emerged to create sites of remembrance, dialogue and resistance.⁹ Artists, curators and cultural workers sought new forms of cultural agency and civic engagement outside state arts institutions, particularly post-2001, when reconciliation and intercultural dialogue became focal points for SEA projects.¹⁰

By the early twenty-first century, SEA had gained broader academic and institutional recognition as a field of practice and theory. Nicolas Bourriaud introduced Relational Aesthetics, framing art as social interaction rather than object-based, legitimising participatory and community-oriented practices.¹¹ Claire Bishop unpacked the conflict, ethics, and power relations involved in participatory projects, and situated SEA within community arts, feminist performance, and activist interventions.¹² Grant Kester articulated how co-created art can function as both aesthetic experience and social intervention,¹³ and François Matarasso reframed participatory arts as a

⁶ Matarasso, F. (1997). *Use Or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*. Comedia.

⁷ Boal developed TO in the 1960s–70s in Brazil as a tool for social empowerment, civic engagement, and political education, in which theatrical spectators become “spect-actors” who intervene in the performance to explore solutions to oppression (Forum Theatre), or proposals for political change (Legislative Theatre).

⁸ Olsen, C. S. (2019). *Socially Engaged Art and the Neoliberal City*. Routledge.

⁹ Kerr R. (2020). Art, Aesthetics, Justice, and Reconciliation: What can art do? *AJIL Unbound*.114, 123–127.

¹⁰ Savić-Bojanić, M., & Kalemaj, I. (2021). Art and Memory as a Reconciliation Tool? Re-Thinking Reconciliation Strategies in the Western Balkans: An Introduction. *Southeastern Europe*, 45(3), 273–290.

¹¹ Bourriaud, N. (1998, English trans. 2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel.

¹² Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso.

¹³ Kester, G. H. (2011). *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Duke University Press.

civic and political practice, while critiquing instrumental evaluation and advocating for more open, ethical, and democratic understandings of cultural participation.¹⁴ Together, these theorists consolidated a definition of SEA as distinct from traditional aesthetics and art forms, defined by relationships, dialogue, ethical responsibility, and social transformation, establishing it alongside institutional critique and public art.

By the 2010s, independent SEA initiatives proliferated across Europe, evolving through cycles of political transformation, conflict, democratisation and cultural exchange. SEA have played roles in education, peacebuilding and reconciliation, community dialogue, climate action, community empowerment and wellbeing, as well as an agent of socio-cultural critique. Across Europe, SEA continue to develop in relation to the needs of civil society, offering infrastructures for collective empowerment, the critique of mainstream political narratives, and inclusive cultural futures.

TERMINOLOGY

SEA has become an umbrella term that includes the diversity of participatory, community-based artistic approaches. Across different contexts, SEA organisations and practitioners have described their work as community-based art education, service learning, place-making, civic engagement, art for social change, social practice, participatory art, activist art (or “artivism”), community cultural development, arts-based community development, dialogic art, tactical media, social sculpture, relational aesthetics, and new genre public art.¹⁵

Diversity in terminology across Europe reflects different cultural policy traditions, community arts movements and linguistic understandings of participation and community.¹⁶ For example, the strong influence of cultural democracy movements in the 1960s-1980s is present in the emphasis on participation and community in Western and Northern European terminology, whereas civic values and cultural animation reflect the socialist and post-socialist traditions in Central and Eastern European SEA. In the Balkans and Caucasus, English terminology is frequently used where SEA-specific terminology is lacking.

This diversity of terminology is one of the reasons why the SEA field is difficult to measure statistically or define consistently. There are, however, themes that point us towards what unites this myriad of terminologies within the same field: **participation, community and mediation.**

¹⁴ Matarasso, F. (1997). Use Or Ornament?

¹⁵ Schlemmer, R. H. (2016). Socially Engaged Art Education. In *Advances in Media, Entertainment, and the Arts*. IGI Global, 1-20; Lehtikoinen, K., & Siljamäki, E. (2023). Socially Engaged Arts (SEA) Practices: Key Skills and Capabilities. *Research in Arts and Education*, 3, 7-26.

¹⁶ A non-exhaustive list of terms in different languages gathered via a literature review is included in Annex II: Table of SEA Terminology.

These three themes tell us that:

SEA across Europe are committed to working **with** communities, rather than producing culture **for** them, through collaborative and participatory artistic processes.

Civic and political histories provide the context and backdrop against which SEA engage communities and create meaning

Mediation is fundamental to SEA practice. It is either a skill that practitioners employ to connect the various stakeholders who enable the creative process, or a role fulfilled by specialist individuals and organisations.

While participation, community and mediation tell us how SEA operate, **a fourth, cross-cutting theme of critical and activist vocabulary** (e.g. activism, eco-social, queer, feminist, decolonial and institutional critique approaches) runs through all three themes, describing the political **purpose** of SEA with particular attention to power, identity, and social transformation.¹⁷

As such, SEA refer to participatory, collaborative and community-based art-making and cultural mediation that emerges in response to specific contexts, identities and histories, guided by an intention to affect positive socio-political change.

DEFINING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

Building on this analysis, **we define SEA as artistic practices in which collaboration, participation, and dialogue are central.**

Rather than producing cultural objects or artworks for audiences that refer to social issues or represent them symbolically, SEA involve working **with** communities to co-create artistic work that embodies real social action.¹⁸

As such, **SEA are shaped by specific historical, social, political, environmental and cultural conditions**, understood through the lived experience of communities. These community realities and the challenges that arise from them inform how SEA initiatives are developed. They are considered through critical reflection, attention to power dynamics, and sustained community engagement to emerge arts-based responses that seek to enact a material change in response to specific circumstances.

SEA do this through co-creative processes that are inclusive and dialogic, based on a principle of shared authorship, rather than the realisation of one artist's vision. This active engagement enables participants to reflect, develop skills, strengthen social relationships, and gain a greater sense of agency, supporting their capacity to effect change in their own lives and wider society.

¹⁷ This explicitly political role may also be the reason that SEA organisations in countries experiencing a shift towards far-right politics or outright authoritarianism are subject to threats and limitations to their work.

¹⁸ Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. New York: Jorge Pinto Book.

In SEA, **the co-creative process and subsequent effects** are part of the artwork. The value of the practice lies less in producing a final object and more in relational and process-based outcomes such as empowerment, wellbeing, and transformation.

In this sense, it is the quality of participation and engagement that generates both artistic and social impact.

Co-creative processes refers to working with people rather than for them — a process where stakeholders, communities, and practitioners collaboratively shape ideas, decisions, and outcomes.

Dialogic art is an artistic practice that centres on dialogue, interaction, and shared meaning-making between artists, participants, and audiences. It treats conversation itself as the medium of the work.

DEFINING THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS COLLECTIVE

SEA organisations operate across multiple sectors and social domains, producing artistic, social, and systemic outcomes that cannot be captured within a defined economic sector. Their highly relational, networked nature links SEA organisations to cultural, social, environmental, and wellbeing systems, creating transversal impact that traditional sectoral analysis misses. SEA are better understood as a “non-sector”: domains that are primarily defined by the practices and methods that define them rather than by clear sectoral boundaries. For naming this “non-sector”, concepts like “ecosystem”¹⁹, “cultural assemblage”²⁰ and Howard Becker’s “Art Worlds” framework²¹ come close to representing the fluid and transversal interactions and collaborations that underpin SEA practice.

However, the notion of a “field” best captures the fluid and dynamic nature of SEA interactions, power relations and flows of capital.²² Fields are made of relationships underpinned by values, power dynamics and the exchange of resources. **Viewing SEA as a “field” allows us to understand it as a complex, cross-sector space where diverse actors interact according to common principles**, as opposed to a sector which is rigidly defined. As such, we refer to SEA as a broad and evolving **field of practice** throughout this report.

¹⁹ European Commission. (2020). Cultural and Creative Sectors in Europe: Supporting Artists and Ecosystems.

²⁰ DeLanda, M. (2006). A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity. Continuum.

²¹ Becker, H. S. (1982). Art worlds. University of California Press.

²² Bourdieu, P. (1998). Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action. Stanford University Press.

FRAMEWORK OF COMMON PRINCIPLES

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS OPERATING PRINCIPLES

It is important to reach for other ways to articulate and define SEA that are inclusive of the diversity of practice that make up the field. This framework seeks to capture the values, operating principles and systemic connections that are common to the majority of SEA organisations we researched.²³

This framework expresses the principles that inform SEA practice in three levels:

- 1** **Values** are core beliefs that reveal what a group considers important and inform behaviour and decisions. They act as an ethical and cultural compass, and SEA organisations often define shared values with their communities.
- 2** While values show what an organisation believes, **operating principles** define how those beliefs are enacted.²⁴
- 3** **Systemic principles** highlight how outcomes emerge from interconnected relationships rather than isolated actions.²⁵ These principles clarify how SEA organisations relate to and influence social, political, and environmental systems.

²³ We asked SEA organisations via a survey and interviews how they defined their work, and what values and principles guide it. We supplemented this with a review of existing SEA frameworks related to specific social outcomes, such as those mapped for arts and health, for example: Warran, K., et al. (2022). What are the active ingredients of 'arts in health' activities? Development of the INgredients iN ArTs in hEalth (INNATE) Framework. *Welcome Open Research*, 7(10).

²⁴ Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

²⁵ Meadows, D. H. (2008). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Fig. 1: A framework of common principles for socially engaged arts

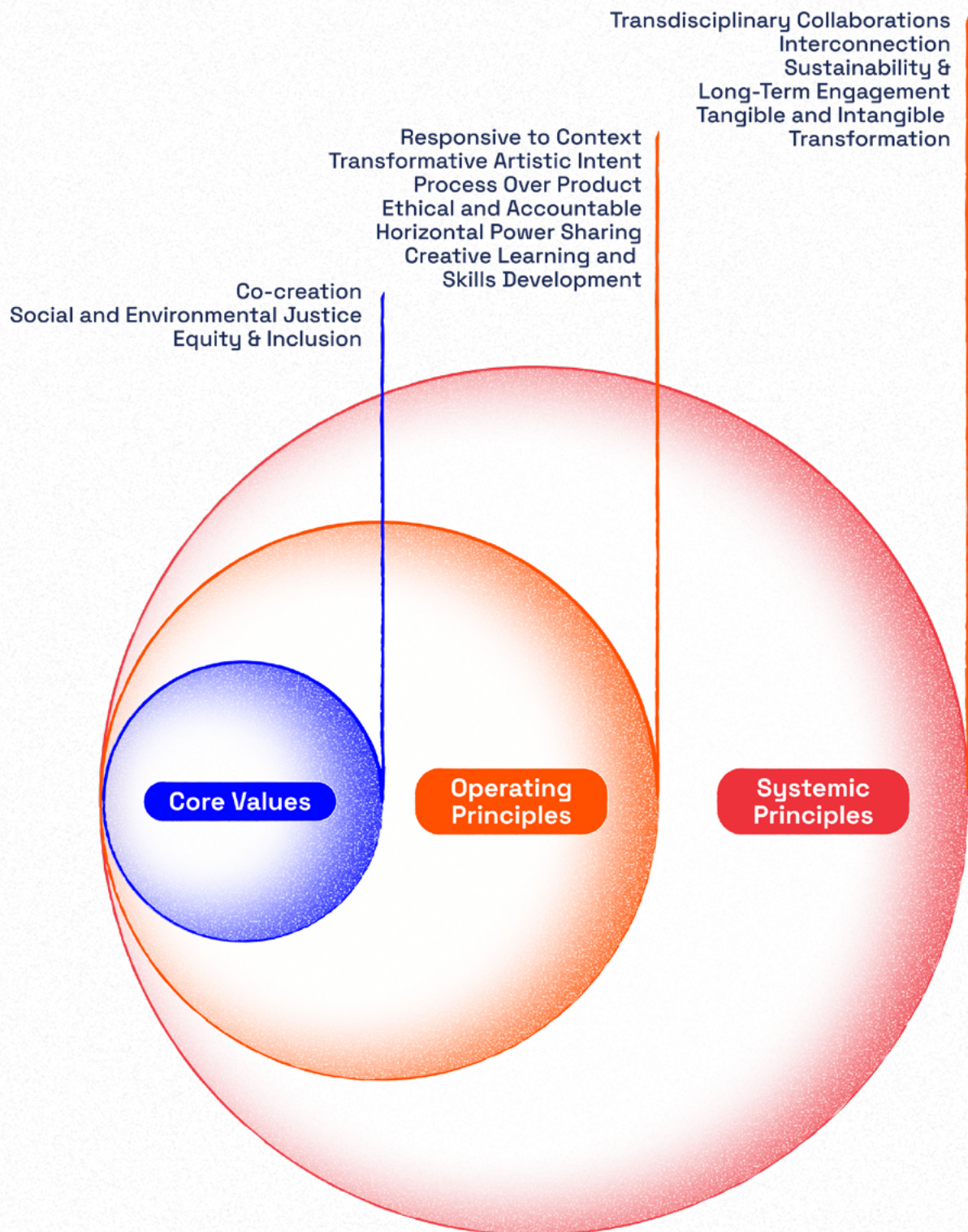


Table 2: A framework of common principles for socially engaged arts

Values and Principles	Description
Core Values	
Co-creation	Artistic processes involve participants as collaborators and co-authors, rather than as spectators. This applies to making artistic work, and also the governance and decision-making of initiatives, projects and organisations.
Social and Environmental Justice	Rooted in the needs and lived experience of communities, they address social, political and environmental issues, catalysing community empowerment and systemic change.
Equity and Inclusion	Valuing diversity, amplifying underrepresented voices, and ensuring access and participation for all community members.
Operating Principles	
Responsive to Context	The work responds to social, political, cultural and environmental conditions affecting communities at a local level and is shaped by the specific needs and desires of communities in context.
Transformative Artistic Intent	SEA activities generate meaningful social, cultural, or environmental change through the co-creative process. Social change is considered part of the artistic outcome.
Process Over Product	The co-creative process guides the work, prioritising experimentation, collaboration, and emergent outcomes, valuing relationships, learning, and dialogue as much as (and sometimes more than) final artistic outputs.
Ethical and Accountable	Prioritising care, accessibility, reciprocity and fair representation in all stages of the work. SEA organisations are accountable to communities and stakeholders.
Horizontal Power Sharing	Decision-making is distributed and shared with communities, within the artistic process and/or in operations and governance, through mechanisms that enable deliberation, expression, and the inclusion of those directly impacted.
Creative Learning and Skills Development	Participants and organisations learn from one another, exchanging lived experience, creative skills and critical understanding through the artistic process through opportunities to reflect, share and articulate learning.

Values and Principles	Description
Systemic Principles	
Transdisciplinary Collaborations	SEA organisations connect and mediate between diverse stakeholders in the artistic process, working transversally across different sectors and disciplines to facilitate participation, artistic and social outcomes.
Interconnection	Social, political and environmental challenges are recognised as interconnected, and this understanding is reflected in the themes and approaches to SEA work.
Sustainability and Long-Term Engagement	Social change and community empowerment are inherently long-term processes. SEA organisations aim to sustain partnerships and artistic processes over time, building ongoing relationships and evolving activity in alignment with the needs, opportunities and desires of communities.
Tangible and Intangible Transformation	Artistic experiences produce social change, new ideas, and relationships that extend beyond the project. Some of these are tangible: artistic works, new relationships, organisations or physical spaces; and others are intangible, such as feelings of wellbeing, belonging and trust that are nonetheless equally valuable.

IMPACT AND INFLUENCE

OVERVIEW: SEA IMPACT



Socially engaged art produces social infrastructures and public formations that are not reducible to instrumental service outcomes but are oriented toward collective processes of transformation.

Shannon Jackson²⁶

SEA use artistic processes to connect people with their innate sense of creativity, which is the basis of agency. They create contexts in which people and communities feel seen and heard, so that they can express their needs and desires and activate practical and imaginative capacities to envision and realise alternative futures in the face of complex challenges — personal, collective and systemic. Often, these processes operate across all three levels simultaneously or achieve this depth of impact by working consistently with communities over time. They foster a sense of belonging and help people overcome powerlessness in the face of seemingly impossible problems, and the mental, physical and relational anguish they generate.

Increasingly, SEA organisations are engaging with complex or “wicked” social challenges, such as migration and climate change. Solving these challenges necessitates the (re)design of systems that are fit to navigate today’s complex challenges. As such, many SEA organisations identify with a mission to contribute to “systemic change”. This section explores how SEA practices create these impacts and offers a framework to capture their multidimensional contribution to systemic change over time.

A “wicked” problem is one which is seemingly impossible to solve because its complexity means that it has no determinable stopping point, and it is interconnected with other complex problems. Climate change, for example, is often referred to as a “super wicked” problem

Systemic change is a fundamental transformation of the structures, relationships, and underlying rules within a system that shapes how it functions and produces outcomes.

Impact as an Integrated Artistic and Social Process

SEA organisations create **aesthetic, social and structural impacts simultaneously** by engaging communities in co-creation, where dialogue, shared experience and collective imagination are integral to the work.²⁷

Creative engagement in the artistic process is widely understood as a powerful driver of personal and collective change because it brings together several reinforcing processes that reshape how people think, feel, and relate to one another. At a neurological level, creative activity supports the brain’s ability to form new connections by integrating systems linked to imagination, reflection, and decision-making.²⁸ This underpins cognitive change: creativity encourages flexible thinking, helping individuals question assumptions, explore alternatives, and reorganise their understanding of the world.²⁹ Creativity also plays a vital role in making sense of past experiences, and, in doing so, people can evolve their sense of identity³⁰ and build resilience in the face of uncertainty.³¹ Immersion in the creative process can also

²⁶ Jackson, S. (2011). *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Routledge.

²⁷ Kester, G. H. (2011). *The One and the Many*.

²⁸ Beaty, R. E., Benedek, M., Silvia, P. J., & Schacter, D. L. (2016). Creative cognition and brain network dynamics. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20(2), 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.10.004>

²⁹ Scott, G., Leritz, L. E., & Mumford, M. D. (2004). The effectiveness of creativity training: A quantitative review. *Creativity Research Journal*, 16(4), 361–388. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj1604_1

³⁰ Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2011). Expressive writing: Connections to physical and mental health. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 417–437). Oxford University Press.

³¹ Gabora, L. (2017). Honing theory: A complex systems framework for creativity. *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences*, 21(1), 35–88.

alter people's sense of time and expand self-consciousness, which can lead to greater focus, enjoyment, and wellbeing while expanding the sense of what is possible.³²

In SEA, these individual shifts extend into the collective: creative processes create shared spaces where people can critically reflect together, deepen mutual understanding, navigate complexity, problem-solve, shape new collective identities and imagine alternative futures.³³ As such, SEA create “imagination infrastructure” — practices, networks, stories, encounters, and forms of care that sustain collective imagination over time, and enable communities to see, think, feel and act differently.³⁴

Engagement in SEA is not, therefore, simply a means of expression — it applies the creative process to acute personal and social challenges in a way that empowers individuals and communities to reframe their experience, integrate diverse perspectives, and imagine new pathways for change. It builds confidence, empathy and the capacity to improvise, make, rehearse and test potential solutions. As such, it becomes difficult to separate artistic and social impact in SEA — they are mutually constitutive, and artmaking in SEA can be seen as a form of social change.

Social infrastructure can be defined as the physical and organisational structures, spaces, and networks that enable communities to interact, collaborate, and support one another. It includes both tangible elements — such as community centers, libraries, parks, and cultural venues — and intangible elements like social networks, norms, relationships of trust, and practices that facilitate engagement in civic life.

Shaping Social Infrastructure and Power Relations

SEA practices not only respond to social challenges — they actively **reshape the conditions in which those challenges emerge**. By creating shared spaces for transformation, SEA practices create temporary (and sometimes permanent) **social infrastructure** — such as physical spaces, relationships, networks and processes through which communities can organise and act — through which trust, shared meaning, and collective agency are built and sustained.³⁵ Through participatory, dialogical and deliberative methodologies, they surface and reconfigure power dynamics, enabling communities to develop agency and influence over the systems that affect them, addressing systemic inequalities, rather than simply mitigating their effects.

A defining feature of how SEA practice creates new forms of social infrastructure, and its ability to work across different levels of impact and influence, is its **mediating function**. SEA organisations often act as intermediaries between communities, institutions and governance structures, facilitating relationships across different systems, perspectives and forms of expertise. It is through this capacity to communicate, mobilise, collaborate and co-create across different sectors and power hierarchies that adds to the transformative potential of SEA organisations.

These capabilities are essential to enabling co-creation and ensuring that participatory processes can generate meaningful social outcomes, and they also represent a significant, and often undervalued, form of labour within SEA practices.

³² Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

³³ Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells*. London: Verso.

³⁴ Oldham, O. (2021, April 30). *Imagination Infrastructure — What Do We Mean?* Medium. <https://oliviaoldham.medium.com/imagination-infrastructure-abd96262fff6>

³⁵ Gauntlett, D. (2011). *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*. Polity.



Photo: Abduction in Štrpci. Photo by Dah Theatre.

Dah Theatre, co-founded in 1991 by theatre director Dijana Milošević in Belgrade, has built a 35-year legacy as a pioneering, independent theater collective using performance as a tool for peace-building, reconciliation, and human rights across the former Yugoslav region and beyond. Born at the outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war, the company's early landmark site-specific performance *Babylonian Confusion* confronted state denial and gave audiences "permission" to acknowledge the reality of war, establishing Dah as a critical voice seeking to unearth more truthful and complex narratives about the inter-ethnic conflict.

Since then, Dah has consistently aligned artistic experimentation with political responsibility: collaborating with feminist and anti-war groups such as *Women in Black*; creating testimonial-based works like *Crossing the Line* from women's war testimonies to restore dignity and visibility

➤ CASE STUDY

DAH THEATRE, SERBIA

to survivors; and working across borders with Kosovo-based artists to symbolically and practically "bridge" communities despite dominant nationalist narratives.

Their practice extends beyond the stage into public-space interventions — such as the *Invisible City* bus performances celebrating multi-ethnic histories — and into capacity-building and accompaniment, for example preparing women to testify at Women's Courts and engaging young people, Roma communities, migrants, and other marginalized groups so their voices can be collectively heard. Operating outside state structures, often in open opposition to government policies, Dah has leveraged international touring, European cooperation projects, and global networks like IMPACT to sustain a long-term, artist-led contribution to peace-building, demonstrating how socially engaged theatre can both challenge violence and cultivate an active culture of human rights and democracy.

➤ CASE STUDY

MEDIATION IN THE NEW PATRONS PROGRAMME, FRANCE

The French New Patrons (Nouveaux Commanditaires) programme empowers citizens to commission works of art that address social, cultural and environmental issues affecting their communities. The initiative brings together artists, citizen commissioning groups, mediators and partners, each with clearly defined roles according to an established protocol.

The commissioning process is supported by specially trained “mediators”, who work with citizens and steward the project from idea to realisation. These mediators are not neutral facilitators. They operate within a codified protocol that ensures clarity of roles, contractual responsibility and public legitimacy of the commission. Their role is crucial to ensure artistic integrity while safeguarding citizen agency and to foster collaboration and mutual understanding. Projects range from public artworks to social processes, performances, and community-led research, with increasing demand for climate and environmental-related commissions. Some projects are proposed by communities, others are ideated by the mediators in collaboration with communities and, on occasion, local municipalities and



Photo: André Morin // Commissioning group COLVERT @ artconnexion-2

other strategic partners or funders.

Initiated in the early 1990s by artist François Hers, the programme developed over 20 years with Fondation de France providing seed money to fund the development of relationships and ideas between communities, mediators and artists. Once a project brief was created by the community with help from the mediators, the mediators were able to raise funds and finance the projects from a variety of sources.

In 2022, governance was transferred to the Société des Nouveaux commanditaires, an association created by the mediators to coordinate the national framework. Today, the programme operates through a network of 50 mediators across France, supported by the Ministry of Culture and the Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation, and has generated more than 500 citizen-commissioned works.

The model has also been adapted in several European countries, including Belgium, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, and the UK, demonstrating the transferability of the methodology.

Beyond Siloes: Transversal and Systems-Oriented Impact

These inherent personal, relational and structural impacts catalysed by SEA practices are what create the conditions for communities to experience and enact change in specific domains of impact, such as wellbeing,³⁶ democratic engagement³⁷ and environmental action.³⁸

As SEA organisations work with communities to create these multiple levels of infrastructure and impact simultaneously, they build capacity to contribute to systemic change. Systems change happens through a combination of changes that shift the conditions which usually hold problems in place. These changes can be grouped into three categories: structural change, such as new policies, practices and resource flows; relational change in the form of new relationships, connections and power dynamics; and transformative change, where new mental models or ways of seeing the world are activated.³⁹ These three categories work hand in hand to reinforce one another, which is why creating a new policy without also supporting a shift in mental models means it's less likely for that policy to be fully implemented.

SEA practices embody systemic change because they often work across all three categories simultaneously. They respond to complex, interdependent social realities by engaging closely with communities to identify “levers for change”, described by one interviewee as “social acupuncture”, addressing social and environmental challenges at the root, and building the conditions for systemic shifts through the artistic process.

They often work transversally to bring about this change by bridging sectors and policymaking areas through partnership and collaboration with other social and environmental services and institutions.

Levers for change are the key points in a system where a relatively small shift can produce a disproportionately large effect on how that system behaves over time.

Transversal refers to something that cuts across, connects, or operates between different sectors, disciplines, groups, or systems rather than staying within a single category or hierarchy.

When compared against recognised frameworks for systemic change, such as the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals — occasionally referenced by SEA organisations and policymakers as a frame to contextualise impact — we observe that SEA organisations often deliver against several goals simultaneously,⁴⁰ challenging the logic of siloed depictions of systemic change and the separation between the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development.⁴¹

SEA impact, therefore, cannot be reduced to single indicators.⁴² **Instead, SEA generate complex social impacts that simultaneously create the imaginative, cultural, relational and structural conditions through which social transformation becomes possible.** These conditions then enable SEA organisations to instigate meaningful change within specific areas of social impact.

³⁶ Perkins, R., et al. (2021). Arts engagement supports social connectedness in adulthood: findings from the HEartS Survey. *BMC Public Health*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11233-6>.

³⁷ European Commission (2023). *Culture and Democracy: The Evidence — How Citizens' Participation in Cultural Activities Enhances Civic Engagement, Democracy and Social Cohesion*. Publications Office of the European Union.

³⁸ Mac Mahon, J., et al. (2025). Arts, creative & cultural initiatives for citizen engagement on climate action: Insights from Ireland's Creative Climate Action Fund. *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*, 9.

³⁹ Kania, J., Kramer, M. & Senge, P. (2018). *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG Reimagining Social Change. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

⁴⁰ UNESCO. (2021). *Thematic Fact Sheet: Culture and Sustainable Development*. UNESCO.

⁴¹ Culture2030Goal. (2022, Sept.). *A Culture Goal: Culture at the Heart of a Post-2030 Agenda*. UCLG Committee on Culture and Culture2030Goal.

⁴² Balfour, T. & Fortunato, J. A. (2018) *The Arts and Social Justice: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Routledge.

➤ CASE STUDY

TEOS KÜLTÜR SANAT DERNEĞİ, TÜRKİYE

Teos Arts and Culture Association (TACA) is a community-rooted cultural organisation in the Aegean region of Türkiye that brings together people from diverse backgrounds to enhance awareness of urban culture, create spaces for arts and culture actors, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and develop projects that empower intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, and lifelong cultural learning. Founded in 2016 by activists, artists, independent publishers, archaeologists, and local governors, it is an example of an organisation in which experts from both social and artistic fields work side by side to address ecological sustainability, protection of cultural heritage, gender equality, and solidarity across local, regional, and international networks.

TACA uses a multi-stakeholder, participatory approach to design its programmes. Before planning activities, it meets with



Photo: Teos Arts and Culture Association. Photo by Esra Okay.

regional interlocutors, local opinion leaders, civil initiatives, and NGOs to understand community needs and priorities. Citizens from all walks of life are invited to contribute ideas, helping shape projects in public spaces like parks, marketplaces, village squares, and historical streets — extending culture beyond urban centres. Programmes follow principles of the Sustainable Development Goals and local strategies for social inclusion, gender equality, and heritage protection. At the end of each project, TACA produces bilingual publications and documentary videos to capture methods, results, and lessons learned, ensuring that experiences can be adapted and transferred to other communities. Their model demonstrates how embedding interdisciplinary collaboration within an organisation's membership can enable strong community engagement and create sustainable cultural impact.

Core Domains of Impact

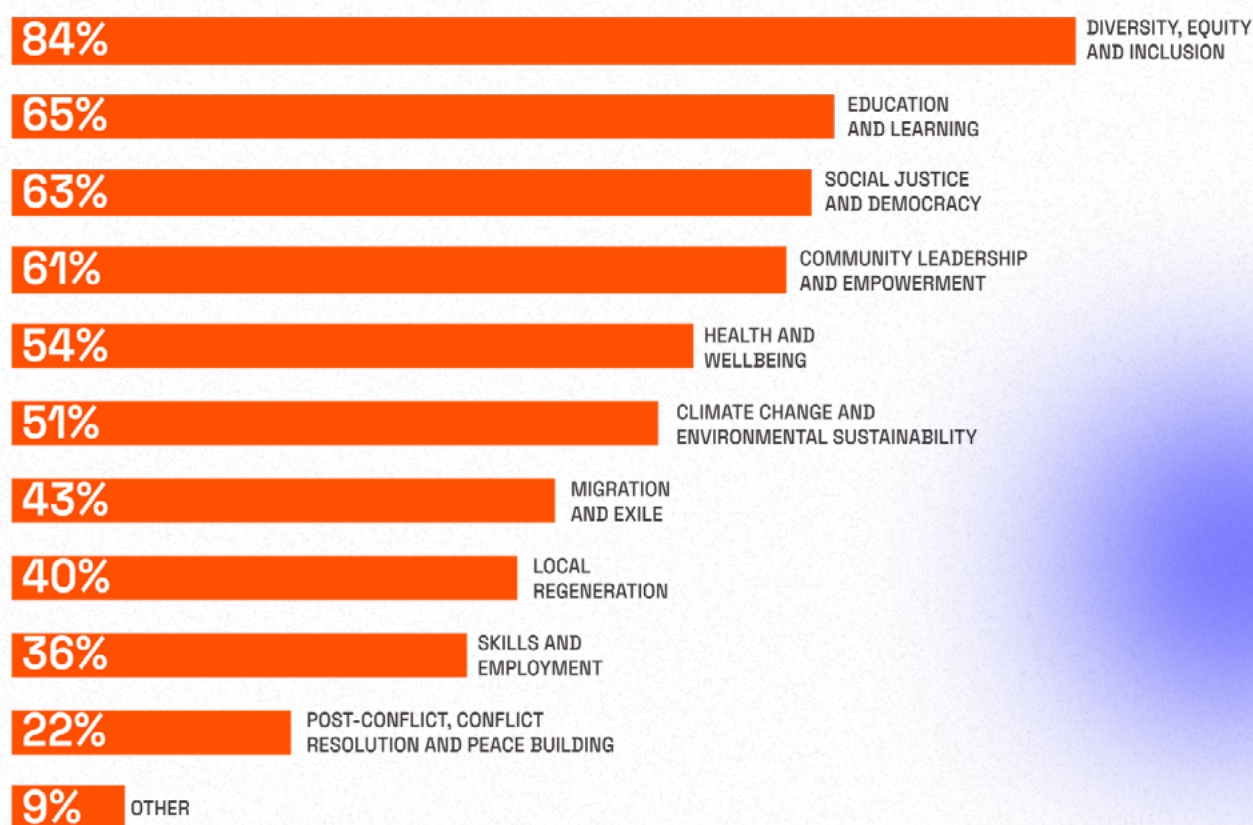
Rather than “specialising” in singular areas of social impact, organisations often respond more flexibly to the complexity of social needs faced by their communities across multiple impact areas.⁴³ This is reflected in the breadth and adaptability of their work: surveyed organisations identified an average of five distinct social impact areas.⁴⁴

“Other” areas of social impact mentioned included feminism, queering and gender equality, supporting cultural production, supporting the SEA field's development, and policy making.

⁴³ 23% of surveyed organisations reported no fixed thematic priorities, instead adapting to the evolving needs of communities.

⁴⁴ Respondents could select unlimited options from the list and add additional impact areas via the “Other” option.

Fig. 2: Topics and social impacts selected by surveyed organisations



These areas of impact at the local level are often experienced as interconnected and dynamic, one influencing the other. For example, community leadership and empowerment are a prerequisite to enabling action on climate change. Conversely, climate change is inseparable from questions of social justice, as vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected, a relationship increasingly framed as climate justice. Working with communities on identifying and creatively responding to climate justice can improve health and wellbeing, local regeneration and the acquisition of new skills.

Organisational scale can also influence both the scope and duration of engagement with different impact areas: smaller organisations we surveyed tend to prioritise immediate and localised challenges — such as health, conflict response and regeneration — demonstrating agility and responsiveness, whereas larger organisations are more likely to engage in sustained work across multiple

complex issues such as education, climate change and environmental sustainability, migration and skills development.

Regional variation further illustrates how these domains are influenced by specific socio-political contexts. While diversity, equity and inclusion, education and social justice are addressed across all regions, other priorities differ amongst surveyed organisations: Northern Europe shows a stronger focus on skills, wellbeing and community leadership; Central and Eastern Europe emphasise social justice and post-conflict engagement; Southern Europe foregrounds local regeneration; and Western Europe places greater emphasis on migration and exile.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ These variations should be interpreted with caution due to uneven sample sizes, but they nevertheless point to the embeddedness of SEA practices within local and regional conditions.

Our research consistently points to several core domains of value across the impact areas above:

1

Building inclusive social relationships and trust.

Through collaborative artistic processes, participants can share experiences, negotiate perspectives and build trust across social differences. These processes can strengthen social cohesion and contribute to what sociologists describe as social capital: the networks, relationships and shared norms that enable communities to act collectively.

2

Enabling participation, civic agency, and democratic engagement.

Beyond supporting dialogue and participation, survey findings show a strong emphasis on social justice, democracy, and community leadership. SEA enables communities to articulate concerns, influence decision-making, and participate in civic life. This domain reflects the field's role in shaping democratic practices at both local and systemic levels, contributing to transversal policy outcomes.

3

Fostering reflection, social imagination, and systemic thinking.

Artistic processes allow communities to reflect critically on complex societal issues, imagine and experiment with alternative futures and ways of being, and take concrete action towards the creation and legitimisation of new systems. They provide entry points to complex issues that connect with people's lived experience and everyday reality, grounding complexity in relatable, relevant events and possibilities for change.

4

Strengthening individual and collective agency.

Participation in co-creation strengthens confidence, voice, and capacity for action. Survey evidence also highlights the importance of skills, employment, and community leadership development, linking creative practice directly to empowerment and practical capacity-building.

5

Generating knowledge, learning, and cultural ecosystems.

SEA produce experiential and collective knowledge, often based on the lived experience of people and communities. It supports informal learning and connects cultural, educational, and social institutions. Survey evidence reinforces the importance of education and learning, showing how SEA practices contribute to skills development, intergenerational knowledge exchange, and the strengthening of local cultural ecosystems.

6

Supporting migration, exile, and post-conflict recovery.

Survey data show a strong focus on migration, exile, and conflict resolution, reflecting SEA's responsiveness to mobility crises, geopolitical tensions, war and conflict. Practices foster intercultural dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion, with the restoration of dignity a key theme across different conflict scenarios we encountered.

7

Transforming space, place, and local environments.

Artistic interventions contribute to placemaking, urban and rural regeneration, and spatial justice. SEA initiatives are reclaiming the commons by creating shared spaces of cultural and civic participation, strengthening people's sense of belonging and collective ownership within neighbourhoods, towns, and cities.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Reclaiming the commons refers to the collective recovery, protection, or reactivation of shared resources, spaces, relationships, and forms of social life that have been privatised, excluded, neglected, or controlled by political or economic systems.



Photo: Kinana. Photo by Art to Face.

Art to Face positions arts and culture as essential tools for education, resilience, and peacebuilding in crisis and post-conflict contexts, helping communities heal, preserve memory, and imagine new futures. It supports artists, educators, and researchers working across more than 15 countries in Europe and around the world to deliver arts-based education, psychosocial support, and cultural preservation, often in challenging environments marked by conflict, displacement, and economic or environmental crises. Through exhibitions,

➤ CASE STUDY

ART TO FACE, WORLDWIDE

participatory projects, webinars, and the International Observatory on Arts, Culture and Education in Crisis and Post-Conflict Contexts, Art to Face documents case studies, shares methods, and builds professional networks that connect isolated practitioners. From theatre workshops in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to painting projects in Haiti and heritage restoration in Syria and Yemen, its initiatives combine creative practice, community engagement, and cultural sustainability, demonstrating how art can strengthen social cohesion, support healing, and enable communities to rebuild and thrive.

8

Enabling environmental awareness and action.

SEA initiatives and organisations increasingly address ecological concerns as a transversal theme, linking artistic practice with climate change, sustainability and the need for a transition towards eco-social justice.⁴⁷ Place-based approaches that are rooted in the lived experience of communities make environmental challenges tangible, relevant and actionable, encouraging agency and behavioural shifts that emerge from the bottom up.

9

Supporting wellbeing, health, and resilience.

SEA foster individual and relational wellbeing, particularly in contexts of trauma, marginalisation, or social isolation. Nurturing caring relationships and empathetic approaches to sustaining each other and the systems they are part of has itself become a form of artistic practice for SEA practitioners and organisations, and the relationship between participation in artistic processes and wellbeing outcomes has a significant body of evidence associated with it.⁴⁸ Across studies, the most consistent finding is that SEA improve health through strengthening the social and relational conditions that underpin wellbeing, like connection, meaning, participation, and belonging.

10

Influencing institutions and systemic change.

SEA practices shape the broader systems in which communities operate, including cultural institutions, social services, and governance structures. This happens through collaboration, participatory engagement in institutional strategy, and SEA embedded within public services and institutional activities.

⁴⁷ This is a domain of impact on the rise, tackled by nearly 50% of surveyed organisations across all regions in the Council of Europe.

⁴⁸ Zbranca, R., Dâmaso, M., Blaga, O., Kiss, K., Dascl, M. D., Yakobson, D., & Pop, O. (2022). Culture's contribution to health and wellbeing. A report on evidence and policy recommendations for Europe. CultureForHealth Report. Culture Action Europe.

➤ CASE STUDY

FONDAZIONE PISTOLETTO CITTADELLARTE, ITALY

Founded in 1998 by Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, Fondazione Pistoletto Cittadellarte is an influential institutional model for socially engaged arts in Italy and internationally. Located in a former textile mill in Biella, it emerged from Pistoletto's Progetto Arte Manifesto (1994), which proposes a new role for the artist in direct interaction with all areas of human activity shaping society. Its mission is to inspire responsible transformation through art, ideas, and creative projects.

The Foundation operates as a school-laboratory and cultural ecosystem where artistic practice catalyses social innovation. Its work is structured into three main areas: Empowering Heritage, Learning and Education, and Engaging Art, which link artistic practice with societal transformation. The organisation is further structured through interconnected "uffici" dedicated to domains such as education, ecology, politics, economy, communication, and design, promoting transdisciplinary collaboration and embedding artistic thinking in civic life.

A key component is the UNIDEE Residency Programmes, which have supported



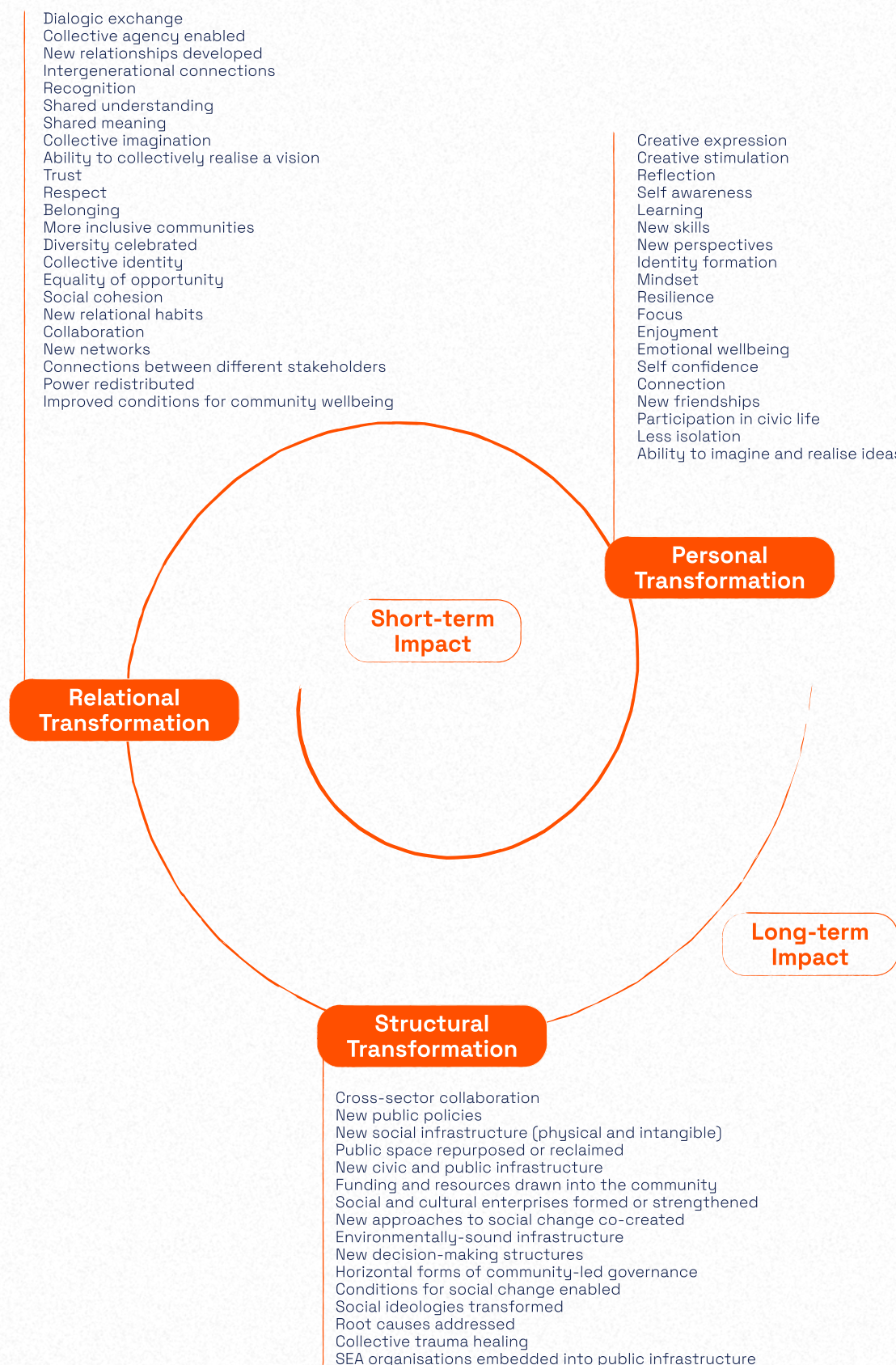
Photo: The Golden Age di Matteo Nasini, Performance Splendore Neolitico, Arte Al Centro, Fondazione Pistoletto Cittadellarte 2023. Photo by Damiano Andreotti.

practitioners working at the intersection of art and social change through time, space, and collaboration since 1999. UNIDEE has evolved into a research-based platform combining collective inquiry and practice-based experimentation, strengthening socially engaged arts as a field and connecting international practitioners with local communities to foster dialogue and transformation. Through initiatives such as Arte al Centro and the Visible Project, the Foundation advances art as cultural policy and care infrastructure.

The Foundation operates through an international network including the United Nations, the European Union, ministries, universities, public administrations, and organisations across sectors such as agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, and research. It also includes the Rebirth / Third Paradise Embassies, active in over twenty countries since 2012, extending its vision globally. Its exhibitions, research, and collaborations demonstrate how an artist-founded institution can build long-term platforms linking artistic production with systemic societal transformation.

A Model to Capture Multi-Dimensional Social Change

Fig. 3. Levels of social impact produced by SEA initiatives⁴⁹



⁴⁹The model is developed from all of the aspects of impact explored in this section. Aspects of it also draw on the findings of the following paper: Bartleet, B. (2023). A conceptual framework for understanding and articulating the social impact of community music. *International Journal of Community Music*, 16(1), 31-49.

COLLABORATION NETWORKS

The SEA field is highly collaborative.

Organisations are embedded in local, national and international networks of cultural and social partnerships, which are crucial to achieving social impact and building resilience through collaboration and exchange.

In nearly all survey respondent countries, capital cities host the highest percentage of cited local partners, revealing a robust SEA presence in major urban hubs where institutional and infrastructural resources are more readily available.⁵⁰

The presence of partners even in small-scale contexts and rural areas suggests that **SEA organisations serve as vital territorial anchors, providing essential social and cultural services beyond metropolitan centres. SEA organisations are also internationally networked, revealing a keen interest in cross-border artistic collaboration** through projects that enable international co-production, knowledge sharing and capacity building between peers, both within and beyond the Council of Europe.

The analysis of cross-border collaborations highlights a clear geographical hierarchy in the international networks of SEA organisations we surveyed.⁵¹ Western Europe hosts the highest number of international partners; Northern Europe shows a preference for partnerships within its region; and extra-European collaborations extend to Africa, North and South America, the Middle East, and East Asia. There were no reported partnerships within the Caucasus region, revealing an opportunity gap to integrate this region into international SEA networks.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION OUTSIDE THE ARTS



Photo: least mlcrucoreia vivre le rhône @ least 2023

SEA organisations are deeply enmeshed with other social fields via direct partnerships and collaborations, occasionally being integrated into public services directly.

The most significant collaborations for SEA organisations are with community organisations and local residents, followed by a myriad of other partnerships with social, public and private partners.

SEA organisations are increasingly becoming embedded in public institutions, such as education. The Bee Camp in Greece works with kindergartens, primary and high schools to deliver workshops and interactive storytelling related to the protection of bees and biodiversity. Future Focus21c EDU, CLG was established to support a just transition through creative placemaking, STEAM education, research and innovation that aims to increase futures and climate literacy, while developing creative agency. Their educational work involves embedding place-based STEAM activities into local school education to support young people and educators to engage creatively with climate change and build capacity for local action.

⁵⁰ Notably, 40% of domestic partnerships occur within the respondent's own city, emphasising the local and place-based nature of SEA relationship-building.

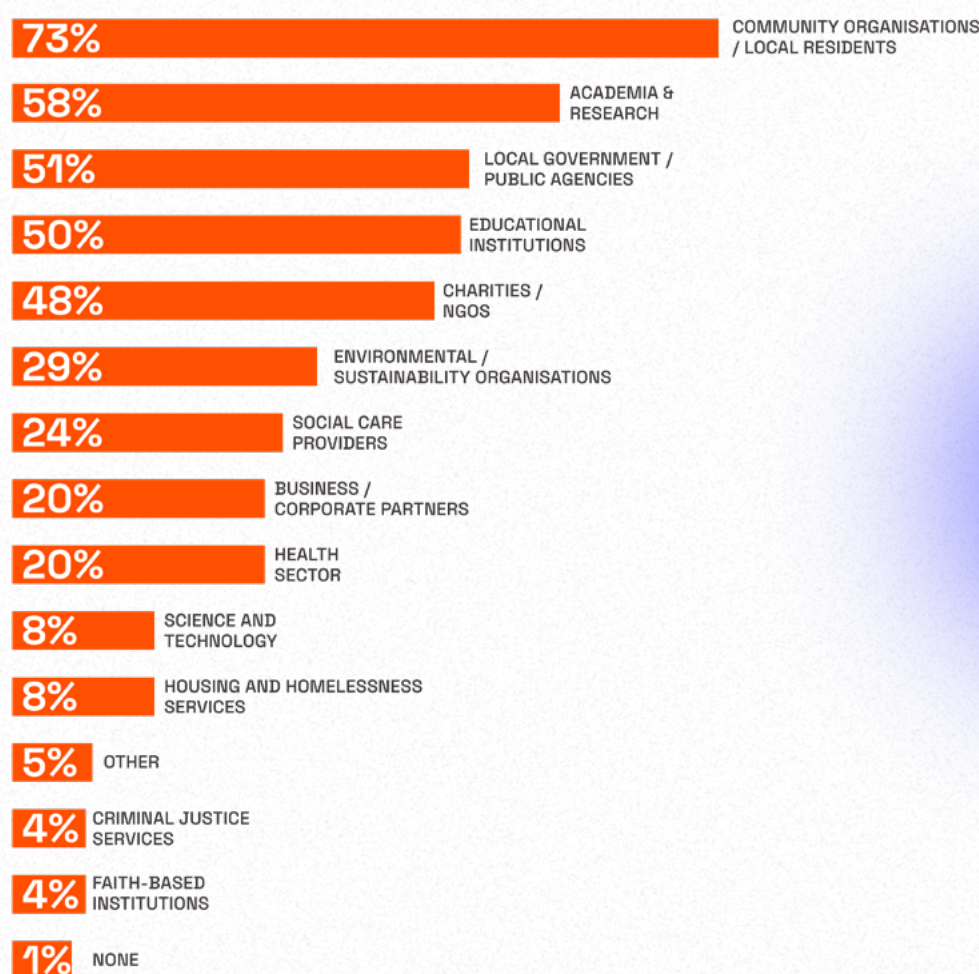
⁵¹ A total of 330 international partnerships were reported by 166 out of the 274 organizations who took part in our survey.

Beyond education, SEA practices are informing community development strategy in the context of climate change. Laboratoire Écologie et Art pour une Société en Transition (least), active between Switzerland and Southern Europe, is an association that develops and supports transdisciplinary, co-creative, and ecological artistic and research processes. Through collaborations with artists, researchers, grassroots organisations, universities, local communities, and public institutions, least supports long-term collective initiatives focused on ecological, social, and territorial transformations across different scales and diverse contexts, such as ecological restoration, urban biodiversity, climate adaptation, collective stewardship of commons, social cohesion, environmental justice, and human–ecosystem relationships, generating outcomes that include participatory governance tools, community-led environmental action, strengthened local networks, ecological awareness, and more viable forms of managing shared territories and resources.

Fig. 4: Word cloud showing the prevalence of different partners to SEA organisations amongst the database of Fellowship applications



Fig. 5: Percentage of surveyed organisations per type of partner



“Other” responses included heritage operators and institutions, the philanthropic sector, Social and Solidarity Economy organisations, as well as activist groups, regulatory bodies, and project participants. From this we can see how **interdependent and embedded the work of SEA organisations is in the systems they seek to influence, and how fundamental collaboration is, both to achieving their artistic and social mission and adding unique value in the sectors they collaborate with.**

The diversity of partners reveals impact-specific partnerships to complement SEA organisations’ expertise in the creative process with domain-specific expertise, skills and social support. This creative expertise is particularly valued by non-arts partners and collaborations, with research suggesting that artistic methodologies

are seen with growing interest in the social sector as innovations.⁵²

The existence of strategic stakeholders such as local authorities, funders, corporate partners and regulatory bodies hints at a possible shift towards greater horizontal collaboration between SEA organisations and strategic bodies, particularly at the local level, where SEA organisations act as critical reference points that connect communities to institutions potentially otherwise inaccessible to their influence. Partnership can also go deeper than project-based collaboration. Some SEA organisations become more systemically embedded in public services, bringing artistic and co-creative principles to empower people to be active in **shaping** services, as well as benefitting from them.

⁵² Ferreira, S., Fidalgo, P., & Abreu, P. (2023). Social enterprises in culture and the arts: institutional trajectories of hybridisation in the Portuguese changing cultural mix. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 29(7).



Photo: teatro ecos, Àmbit theatre group. Photo by Asociación Àmbit

Founded in 1993 in Valencia, Spain, Asociación Àmbit is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the reintegration of people in prison and individuals at risk of social exclusion, particularly those experiencing mental health conditions. Operating through a mixed governance model — horizontally structured teams combined with board-level oversight — it represents a consolidated form of socially engaged arts embedded within local public welfare infrastructures.

With over 40 staff members working with a larger group of volunteers, and an annual budget of around €1.5 million, Àmbit is primarily funded through local and regional public grants. Àmbit runs a shelter, three supervised homes in València and two more in the Castellón rural area, dedicated to people with mental health conditions and/or lived experience of social exclusion. In addition, the organisation has its headquarters in downtown Valencia. Àmbit does not own all of those premises. Some are owned by the organisation, and some others are rented. Unlike more precarious grassroots initiatives, it functions as a recognised institutional partner within Spain's social service ecosystem, supported by external evaluations that reinforce its policy legitimacy and long-term integration.

Àmbit adopts a recovery-oriented, human rights-based approach in which artistic practice (particularly theatre, visual arts, film, and literature) serves both therapeutic and empowerment objectives. Through autobiographical theatre projects (such as those funded by the Erasmus+ programme)

➤ CASE STUDY

ASOCIACIÓN ÀMBIT, SPAIN

and a permanent theatre group comprising former prisoners and people with mental health conditions, art becomes a means of narrative reconstruction, restoring personal dignity and achieving public visibility. Participants engage also in decision-making, introducing participatory governance within a structured institutional framework.

The organisation's vision and values recognise human dignity as in Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights. They respect each individual's will and allow them to be part of the decision-making within the supervised homes or shelters where they stay. Through weekly assemblies in each supervised home, beneficiaries collectively make decisions that affect their everyday life, such as the weekly menu and leisure activities. This approach is also used in cultural activities and workshops. A yearly general assembly is carried out with the participation of the CEO and the board of directors, where beneficiaries can openly express themselves.

Working with neurodivergent individuals or people with disabilities, people who are homeless, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and victims of violence, Àmbit ensures continuity of care through its integration into public systems, contrasting with short-term, project-based models more prevalent elsewhere in Europe. Although challenges persist, including persistent stigma, the organisation exemplifies a hybrid model in which socially engaged art operates as an embedded component of public infrastructure, directly contributing to reintegration, social justice, and community-based mental health support.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE WIDER ARTS AND CULTURAL SECTOR

“Brunnenpassage’s founding mission is based on the Declaration of Human Rights Article 27 which states that everyone has the right to freely participate in cultural life and the arts. It operates as a laboratory and venue for transcultural and participatory art in Vienna’s 16th district, at Brunnenmarkt, a market area characterized by a high percentage of socially disadvantaged residents and individuals with migration experience. Participatory productions emerge from the daily relationship with its surrounding in co-creation with local communities and professional artists, often in cooperation with established art and cultural institutions. Through a continually evolving transdisciplinary approach our four priorities are: creating community, individual and collective artistic research with participants, discursive (co)-curation, and partnerships as bridges to so-called “high art” institutions of the inner city centre.

Fariba Mosleh
Curator for Performative and Visual Art, ArtSocialSpace
Brunnenpassage Vienna, Austria

Historically, SEA organisations have operated in tension with the wider arts and cultural sector, a divide that has its roots in the top-down “**cultural democratisation**” and bottom-up “**cultural democracy**” movements of the late nineteenth century. The coexistence of these two movements provoked a critical question: should engagement with art merely refine individuals, or should it enable broader social transformation?

This tension, between participation as inclusion and participation as redistribution of power, remains central to the cultural sector, with SEA practices encouraging a shift towards the latter.

The contrary stance of SEA has played out through successive movements throughout the twentieth century. When community arts emerged as a significant movement in the late 1960s and 1970s,⁵³ it explicitly positioned itself against an art world perceived as elitist and socially detached, embedding practice in working-class, post-industrial, and politically marginalised contexts while seeking to redefine both the purpose and audience of art. This placed community arts practitioners and organisations outside of established institutional hierarchies that privileged traditional definitions of artistic value.

Cultural democratisation is the policy approach of making established, often institutionally defined culture (such as museums, theatres, and classical arts) more widely accessible to as many people as possible, primarily by increasing participation, attendance, and access. It focuses on expanding reach into existing cultural systems, rather than changing who defines culture or how cultural value is created.

Cultural democracy is the principle that everyone has the right not only to access culture, but to create, shape, and influence cultural life on equal terms, rather than culture being defined or controlled by a small group of institutions or elites.

⁵³ McGrath, R. (1981). Community Arts: An Evaluation of its Theory and Practice. Arts Council of Great Britain.

Although SEA have since professionalised and expanded under the broader umbrella of participatory and socially engaged practices in many regions across Europe, this historical positioning continues to shape their relationship to the arts and cultural sector. Increasingly, SEA are embedded within cultural policy frameworks that prioritise measurable outcomes such as inclusion, wellbeing, and regeneration, reflecting what has been widely described as an “instrumental turn” in cultural policy.

While this alignment has created new funding opportunities and strengthened connections with arts institutions seeking more participatory and community-oriented approaches, it has also produced a structural ambivalence: SEA are valued for their social utility but often still marginalised within the art world for their departure from object-based aesthetics and conventional notions of artistic excellence.⁵⁴ This is especially true in a context where the erosion of artistic value is a perceived threat which cultural organisations actively mobilise against regularly.⁵⁵

However, recent developments indicate a partial shift in this dynamic, with cultural institutions and policymakers placing greater emphasis on participation, co-creation, and community engagement. European and national policy frameworks increasingly frame culture in terms of social inclusion, democratic access, and civic participation, encouraging closer collaboration between SEA practitioners and mainstream arts organisations.⁵⁶ At the same time, SEA practitioners report growing recognition of their expertise in facilitating participatory and relational processes, particularly as arts and cultural institutions seek to diversify programming and strengthen local relevance.⁵⁷

As such, the overall landscape reflects a shift that sees **SEA moving from the margins into the core of contemporary cultural institutions, united by the imperative to make culture central and directly relevant to community life.** The history of SEA challenging hierarchical and conventional cultural frameworks is maturing into an asset that could serve the wider arts and cultural sector in “making the case” for public arts and cultural funding in the face of increasingly instrumental cultural policy frameworks, positioning the SEA field as a driver for cultural resilience.

⁵⁴ The production of physical works of art.

⁵⁵ Belfiore, E. (2014). ‘Impact’, ‘value’ and ‘bad economics’: Making sense of the problem of value in the arts and humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 14(1).

⁵⁶ European Commission. (2025). *Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026: Council conclusions on the strategic priorities for the cultural sector*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/>.

⁵⁷ This was strongly reflected in the Alliance’s Fellowship applications where arts and cultural sectors were the most frequently cited partners for SEA activity across Europe.

THE ROLE OF ARTISTS

Artists are fundamental to the operational, intellectual and social development of the SEA field. While the primary focus of this research is on SEA organisations, it is not possible to build a coherent picture of the field without first centring the role of artists in its development. [The history of the field](#) is rooted in practice of individual artists and community practitioners whose creative engagement with political events and community needs have translated into scholarship, organisation and policymaking, as well as social change.

Artists and SEA organisations have a symbiotic relationship. Many SEA organisations are founded by artists or based on artist-led initiatives which eventually formalise into organisations to facilitate longer-term engagement, access to resources and/or the scaling-up of methodologies and impacts.⁵⁸ Artists contribute to organisational governance as directors, or through board or association memberships.

Organisations likewise provide a context for artists to work and develop their practice while relying on them in the delivery of SEA activity. As artists increasingly base their SEA practice in the places and communities in which they live, they offer lived experience, authentic understanding and relationships to SEA initiatives, aside from the skills they bring.

Artists also occupy different roles as artist-academics, generating research and insights that go on to inform SEA practice and also the development of local, national and international policymaking. As artist-educators in formal and non-formal educational settings, they build the capacity and skills of emerging artists through practice-specific education, which is necessarily different from a more traditional arts education.

⁵⁸ This trend is likely to continue, given that emerging artists are increasingly driven by a deep desire to be part of wider movements for systemic change in the face of political dysfunction, conflict and war, economic precarity, forced migration and the climate crisis.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS ORGANISATIONS

A GROWING FIELD

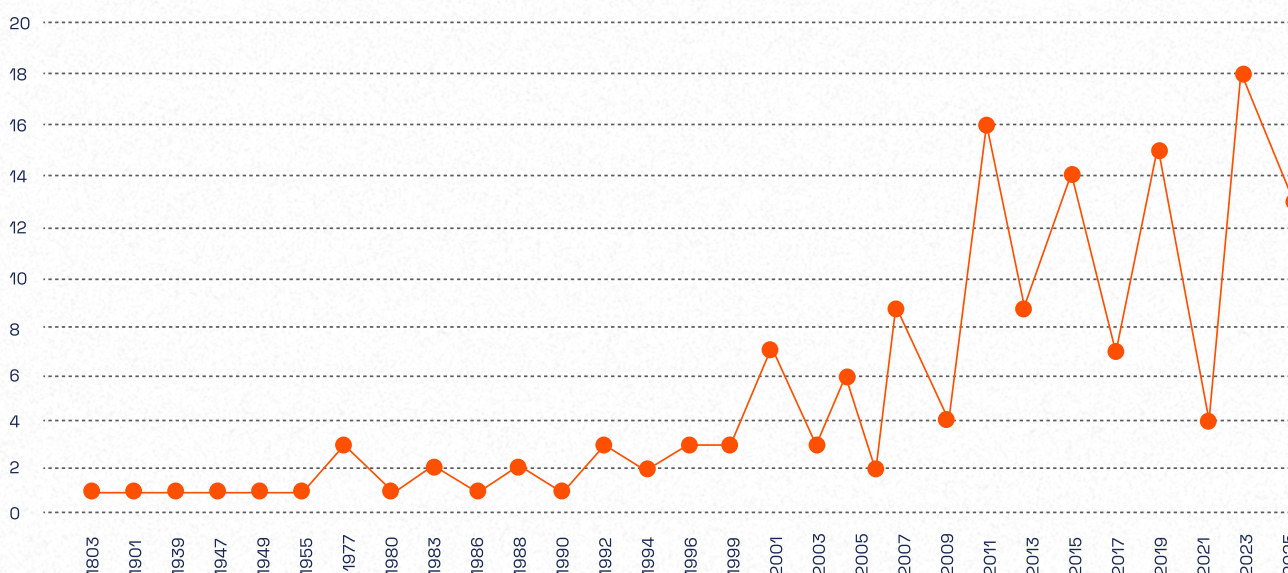
According to Eurostat figures, cultural and creative sectors employ 8.7 million people in the EU, equivalent to 3.8% of the total workforce in the EU, representing 1.2 million enterprises.⁵⁹ Due to the high level of fragmentation in terminology and a lack of consistent recognition in European and national statistical monitoring and policymaking, it is difficult to define the boundaries of an “SEA sub-sector” across Europe. As such, we do not have a reliable estimate for what proportion of Europe’s 1.2 million cultural and creative enterprises is dedicated to SEA practice.⁶⁰ This challenge to identify the boundaries of the SEA field’s economic “sector” is compounded by the fact that many SEA organisations in certain regions of Europe operate as NGOs under civil society frameworks, as opposed to being legally recognised as cultural organisations, and there are also non-arts organisations that commission and deliver SEA work in collaboration with artists.

However, what our data does indicate is that the number of active organisations specifically identifying as SEA (rather than arts) organisations has been increasing since the late 1990s.⁶¹ While we do not know the average lifespans of SEA organisations, this trend could indicate a field experiencing a period of growth.

These new entrants to the field coincide with the naming and theoretical conceptualisation of SEA in academia, early integration of SEA into national and local development plans, and a shift in cultural policy discourse towards participatory approaches from the 1990s onwards. All these milestones have provided a wider context for new organisations to identify as SEA organisations and establish themselves in response to policymaking and research, as well as local, community-rooted social challenges.

The formalisation of SEA initiatives into new organisations is closely tied to the urgency of social need, the necessity to draw down resources to sustain initiatives, and the will of artists and organisations to apply their skills to catalyse collective social change

Fig. 6: Surveyed organisations by year of foundation



⁵⁹ European Commission. (2023, June 7). Data on the cultural sector. European Commission Culture and Creativity. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/selected-themes/data-on-the-cultural-sector>

⁶⁰ The statistical challenges are further impacted by the existence of SEA practices embedded in organisations registered as social enterprises or charities that do not necessarily identify as arts organisations but work through art-based methods in the same way as SEA organisations do.

⁶¹ Both the database of Fellowship applications and the survey data showed a majority of responses from young organisations established in the late 1990s onwards. In the case of the Fellowship, this bias makes sense — we would expect younger organisations to seek out capacity building support. However, the survey did not attract this bias, which suggests that the greater number of young organisations could indicate a field experiencing a growth.

in the face of adversity.⁶² Among newer entrants to the field, engagement with complex global crises such as migration and climate change is more frequent, and it is possible that as Europe's polycrisis deepens, more SEA practitioners are motivated to establish organisations to respond more effectively to community needs.⁶³

The formation of the Alliance itself also suggests **a field that is growing both in scale and impact, moving from marginal to institutionalised and meriting coordinated collective development and advocacy.**

ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

This section gives an insight into the characteristics and working realities of SEA organisations across Europe. For more detailed insight, you can read our [Supplement to this report](#).

Mission-Driven and Led by Social Purpose

SEA organisations are fundamentally defined by their relationship to society. They are driven to engage with and respond to complex societal issues through artistic and interdisciplinary practices.

Compared to more traditional arts and cultural organisations, their missions are not primarily articulated through artforms or aesthetic goals, but through a clear commitment to social purpose — often grounded in specific communities, places, and lived realities. Across the field, artistic practice is articulated as a catalyst for advancing more just, inclusive, and reflective societies.



All our work is driven by striving for a more just and fair world. The foundation of our practice is based on the idea that we never know enough, and we need different places, people, realities and perspectives to counter the assumptions we hold as individuals to co-create new realities on the basis of knowledge of each other and of different contexts and realities. It's an immersive space for learning and imagining about what connects us as human beings rather than what divides us. From this place of understanding a beginning of what it means to be human, we believe we can imagine more open and tolerant societies that thrive on embracing diversity instead of the concept of identity.

Inge Ceustermans,
General Director, The Festival Academy, Belgium

Among surveyed organisations, “community building and engagement” was the most common thematic mission.⁶⁴ Organisations position themselves as facilitators of connection, dialogue, and collective experience, often creating spaces where diverse perspectives can be shared and new forms of understanding can emerge.

Missions related to education and creative social innovation⁶⁵ reflect the embeddedness of SEA in educational work.⁶⁶ Creative social innovation encompasses the development of new participatory methods, organisational models, and cross-sector collaborations designed to respond to complex social challenges. Learning and education refer not only to arts education but also arts-led learning that supports people to engage creatively with social challenges, opening up new perspectives

⁶² As mentioned in the previous section, interview data revealed an anecdotal increase in emerging artists and students of art choosing SEA as their method, driven by a desire to use their abilities to make a positive difference in the world. Given the central role of artists in the formation of SEA organisations — and initiatives that later become organisations — we include this trend within the evidence base that contributes to our hypothesis that the field is growing.

⁶³ When several different crises happen at the same time and interact in ways that make each one worse and harder to solve. Explained in more detail under [Polycrisis](#).

⁶⁴ Shared by 49% of surveyed organisations.

⁶⁵ Each shared by 19% of surveyed organisations.

⁶⁶ Each shared by 19% of surveyed organisations.

and building artistic skills that improve wellbeing and build agency.

Themes such as public space, placemaking, and regeneration position SEA as a catalyst for communities to reimagine and reclaim underused or contested public spaces, often acting as mediators between public institutions and communities to give communities a meaningful voice in design and decision-making in their lived environment.

Finally, an emerging but increasingly significant dimension of SEA missions is the articulation of eco-social practice. Here, organisations recognise the interconnected nature of social and ecological challenges, framing environmental concerns not as separate issues but as integral to questions of justice, equity, and sustainability. This perspective signals a shift in the field, from using arts to raise environmental awareness towards rethinking the role and responsibility of socially engaged practice itself in the context of ecological crisis.

Legal Form

The majority of SEA organisations across Europe tend to be non-profit associations, a member-based, mission-oriented legal form governed by a board and a members' assembly that embodies the democratic and participatory ethos of horizontal leadership common to many SEA initiatives.⁶⁷ They often begin as community-led initiatives or informal artist collectives emerging from shared political or cultural concerns, and tend to formalise in response to funding opportunities, spatial access or regulatory requirements.⁶⁸

A range of corporate and hybrid legal forms is

also used by a minority of SEA organisations, including non-profit companies such as civil law entities (Greece), companies limited by guarantee (UK and Ireland), or cooperatives (Italy, France, and Spain). In Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, legal forms tend to be more closely tied to national NGO legislation, positioning SEA organisations within civil society frameworks.⁶⁹

Legal statuses are overlayed onto some commercial legal forms to endow SEA organisations with a formal recognition of their social or cultural impact. They are particularly important for social enterprises with mixed models of earned income and funded activities, to evidence social or charitable purpose and non-profit status to funders.⁷⁰

Governance

Governance in SEA organisations tends towards horizontal and mixed models, with purely vertical structures representing a small minority.⁷¹ These models include fluid structures that adapt team formations and artistic leadership around specific projects, revealing the agility of SEA organisations and their relationships to freelance artists, curators and other team members. In organisations with annual budgets of over €1 million, a mixed model becomes the standard for managing increasing complexity. Communities also contribute to organisational governance in 38% of the organisations we surveyed.⁷²

⁶⁷ 90% of the legal forms present among non-profit organisations in EU countries are associations. Source: Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs. Associations. European Commission, 2023.

⁶⁸ Wright, J. D. (2019). The ecology of cultural space: towards an understanding of the contemporary artist-led collective. Doctoral dissertation. University of Leeds.

⁶⁹ Rutzen, D., Moore, D., & Durham, M. (2009). Reformist Leaders and Civil Society: The Legal Framework for Not-for-Profit Organizations in Central and Eastern Europe. *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 11(2). <https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/the-legal-framework-for-not-for-profit-organizations-in-central-and-eastern-europe>

⁷⁰ For example, charitable or public benefit status (UK, Ireland, and parts of Western Europe) grants tax benefits and public accountability for mission-driven work. Italy's *Impresa Sociale* status legally mandates a social purpose and limits profit distribution. In the UK the Community Interest Company (CIC) status requires that assets and profits serve the community and meet the legally defined community interest test.

⁷¹ A mixed governance model (e.g. horizontal team structure with formal decision-making authority vested in a board) was adopted by 44% of surveyed organisations, and 39% of organisations employed a purely horizontal governance model.

⁷² See Relationship with Communities for more detail on community involvement in SEA organisational governance.

Leadership



I'm a systems thinker. I always look at the whole ecosystem of the work to see where the weak spot is, see the points in which I can intervene, open up, create more dialogue, conversation, connections, networks.

Anita McKeown

Co-founder and Director, Future Focus21c Edu, Ireland

Leaders in SEA organisations are values-oriented, prioritising social justice and community relevance alongside artistic and economic sustainability. Their remit extends beyond aesthetics to stewarding social impact and transformation, drawing on systems thinking skills and often describing their role as creating the conditions for work to happen rather than solely delivering it. They act as advocates, practitioners and mediators, skilled in dialogue and cross-sector communication with funders, policymakers, and social partners. Rather than fitting the model of a single “visionary” leader, SEA leadership is collaborative and facilitative, with authority distributed across networks and roles often shared or fluidly delegated depending on experience. They are increasingly preoccupied with the ethical dimensions of SEA work, navigating power redistribution, co-authorship and the need for trauma-informed expertise in certain circumstances.

Systems thinking is understanding a problem by looking at how all its parts interact together as a whole rather than studying each part separately.

Organisation Size

The SEA field is predominantly made up of small-to-medium-sized organisations. The majority operate with an annual budget under €500,000 and a staff body of fewer than 10 people,⁷³ though budget and workforce size do tend to increase over time.⁷⁴

Financial Profile

SEA organisations tend to have mixed funding models, predominantly financed through local, regional and national public grants. In addition to cultural grants, SEA organisations are increasingly accessing funding from ministries of education, environment, development, regeneration and healthcare. The majority of these grants seem to be project-based, rather than oriented towards supporting core operating costs.

Organisations founded after 2021 with fewer than 10 staff members tend to have a more diversified funding mix. They combine national and local funds with a greater use of EU grants, crowdfunding, donations and corporate sponsorship. Organisations founded before 1990 are more anchored to national funds and earned income, reflecting a more traditional arts and cultural business model. The difference could be driven by a more competitive atmosphere as the field expands and traditional forms of public funding decrease through both cuts and increased demand, forcing organisations to adapt and seek out new forms of financing to support their work.

Alternative Business Models

SEA organisations are increasingly exploring alternative financing strategies to navigate structural funding gaps and reduce dependence on traditional project

⁷³ About two thirds of surveyed organisations have annual turnovers below €250,000, with over 44% of the overall sample declaring annual budgets below €100,000.

⁷⁴ While this could represent an encouraging trend of building stability and greater capacity over time, it's also important to acknowledge contextual changes — older organisations have potentially experienced periods of relatively higher public investment in the arts and culture, while the environment for newly founded organisations is typically more competitive, given the increase of SEA organisations founded in the last two decades and the overall downturn in public funds for culture in the same period across Europe.

grants. Research shows that conventional philanthropic and non-repayable sources — including grants, donations, and sponsorship — remain essential, but their limitations pose risks to long-term sustainability.⁷⁵ In response, public and private funders are experimenting with innovative mechanisms such as repayable grants, microloans and hybrid instruments that combine soft funding (non-repayable financial support) with repayable capital. These alternatives adapt investment-driven models to align cultural and social impact with financial sustainability.

In France, the evergreen investment fund ArtNova deploys €100 million across real estate, heritage, creative businesses, and media, with half of its returns directed to the Art Explora Foundation, a public-interest foundation that combines private philanthropy with partnerships across public and cultural sectors to promote cultural democracy through participatory and educational initiatives. Meanwhile, La French Touch Capital blends soft funding, loan guarantees, loans, and equity for arts, entertainment, and design enterprises, adapting venture-style tools to cultural ecosystems.

In Spain, the social enterprise Aulafilm exemplifies hybrid public-private models at the grassroots level. By combining funding from private distributors, producers, and educational partners with support from city councils and state institutions, Aulafilm sustains an ecosystem that fairly compensates filmmakers, rights-holders, and cinemas while delivering educational and cultural value. Its collaborative approach illustrates how hybrid financing can reinforce participatory and community-centred practices, while supporting operational sustainability.

While models like this do not replace the need for stable public funding, they highlight pathways towards new financing mechanisms that are crucial to supporting

organisational resilience in a field currently constrained by short-term, project-based funding.

Access to Space

SEA organisations are predominantly urban and rooted in local places and communities.

SEA organisations also operate in rural and peripheral areas, where a lack of plural services often results in multifunctional organisations, although they are less visible in literature and research about the field.

Many SEA organisations operate from repurposed buildings, shared spaces and temporarily occupied sites.⁷⁶ This reflects both the grassroots origins of many SEA organisations and the relationship between artistic interventions and the reclamation of public space:



[We] privilege public space as a primary site for our artistic actions. We understand the city as a relational space where meanings, conflicts, and relationships between different social and cultural groups are constantly negotiated. By working in public space, we actively resist its increasing commodification as a site of consumption and production, and instead reclaim it as a space for encounter, dialogue, and collective imagination.

Serenella Martufi,
Co-artistic Director,
Medeber Teatro, Belgium

⁷⁵ Giulio, F. & Patton Power, A. (2025). Innovative finance for the cultural and creative industries: From grants to impact investments. Deloitte Private Art & Finance Report.

⁷⁶ d'Etorre, Benedetta. (2023). Motivations, Modalities and Sustainability: small artists organisations and cultural ecologies. Doctoral thesis. The University of Leeds School of Performance and Cultural Industries.

Across our survey of organisations, public space included neighbourhood parks, marketplaces, squares, historical sites, coffee houses and community halls. Many organisations also work in spaces dedicated to public services, such as hospitals, day centres, schools, emergency centres for migrants, residential homes, and boxing gyms. The principle behind this is not only to embed themselves within wider social structures and services, but to take arts activity to where people already socialise or access support, rather than trying to draw them into arts and cultural spaces where they might not yet feel they belong.

40% of surveyed SEA organisations operate without a permanent base, using different spaces according to their activities and projects. Renting from public or private entities is the most common form of fixed location, though **there is a gradual shift to ownership as the organisation’s budget size and staff capacity grow over time.**⁷⁷

ARTFORMS AND METHODOLOGIES

A majority of surveyed organisations identified combined arts as their preferred artistic media across all regions, reflecting the field’s increasingly interdisciplinary nature. Anecdotally, organisations shared that working through combined arts enabled responsiveness to the needs and desires of their community collaborators.

Table 3: Percentage of respondents selecting each artistic media

Artform	% of respondents selected ⁷⁸
Combined arts	63%
Visual arts	47%
Theatre	33%
Film and audiovisual	25%
Music	25%
Dance	20%
Museums and heritage	14%
Literature	10%
Other	24%

Combined arts refers to creative work that intentionally brings together two or more art forms — such as music, theatre, dance, visual art, or digital media — into a single, integrated piece. Rather than presenting each form separately, these elements are combined, often alongside non-art disciplines like technology or community participation.

⁷⁷ Organisations in mid-range budget tiers (€500,000 – €1 million) show a higher-than-average access to rented venues. The majority of organisations established before 1990 and organisations with a budget above €5 million own their properties.
⁷⁸ Respondents could select more than one artform, which is why the percentages don't add up to 100%.

Other artistic practices that we mapped include circus, murals, digital media, site-specific interventions, storytelling, poetry, fiction, and oral history. Conceptual, processual, performance, and land art are used to reframe everyday actions such as walking and sharing food as intentional artistic practices, creating opportunities for participants to engage mindfully and reflectively in dialogue and experience mutual recognition.⁷⁹ It also creates accessible opportunities for experimentation and expression, enabling participants to explore new roles and ways of interacting within a supportive environment.

SEA organisations employ a diverse range of artistic methodologies, drawing on both traditional and experimental forms. Many organisations do not work within a single methodology. Instead, **they blend artistic, participatory and research approaches** depending on context, community, or project goals. Methods are selected flexibly to address social, cultural, or environmental conditions. For example:



“We work at the intersection of art, well-being, migration, community care, and civic participation, using co-creation, storytelling, and embodied practices as methodologies. We define our approach as culture-driven social impact, where artistic processes support identity reconstruction, empowerment, and social inclusion.”

Alina Vasieikina,
President, SENSI Holistic Creative
Agency, Italy

Participatory and co-creative methodologies position participants as active collaborators through citizen-led initiatives, participatory theatre, collective music-making, and other forms of co-creation, grounding aesthetic processes in community needs, visions and lived experience. Principles such as horizontal decision-making, peer-to-peer support, intercultural dialogue, and processes led by specific target groups, such as youth, guide these practices, ensuring they respond to context, community needs, and power dynamics.

Research, facilitation, and reflective practices support critical inquiry, knowledge co-production, and iterative learning. Participatory action research, narrative mapping, living labs, facilitation, coaching, and workshops often intersect with artistic and participatory methods, embedding reflection into the process of art-making to enable critical thinking, learning and evolution in the process. The facilitation skills and approaches drawn from this methodological group help create safe, relational spaces for transformation that put people at ease, build trust and enable people to be heard.

SEA interventions often combine more than one of these methodological groups. They are process-oriented and iterative, evolving in response to participant engagement and emerging needs.

Organisations sometimes work through established methodologies — such as Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed — and others use a combination of different methodologies to craft their own context-responsive approach. When employed over time, these new methodologies can become part of their organisational DNA and become associated with the organisation and its impact.

⁷⁹ Greene, M. (2000). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. Wiley.



Photo: Fighting Seeds

➤ CASE STUDY

FIGHTING SEEDS, GERMANY

Fighting Seeds is a transdisciplinary project working across art, science, and community, focused on restoring damaged soil and reviving ecological knowledge. By working with seeds, it connects communities in Europe and Palestine, turning cultivation into a shared practice of memory, resistance, and renewal. The initiative, run by an informal group of practitioners, explores the journeys of seeds and their links to farming traditions, food, and everyday life. Through workshops, peer-to-peer somatic practices (learning through shared, hands-on physical activity), storytelling, and practical work — from seed collecting to caring for crops — it builds knowledge and community resilience.

Fighting Seeds is a socially engaged, agro-ecological art practice.⁸⁰ It centres on seed sovereignty,⁸¹ collective care, and land-based knowledge.⁸² Seeds are treated as living agents and cultural archives, bringing together artists, farmers, and researchers around a practice-led research framework⁸³ that connects creative work with ecology and real-world challenges. The artwork is a support system that sustains relationships, protects community knowledge handed down over generations from erasure and loss, and strengthens everyday farming as a form of resistance in the face of conflict.

⁸⁰ Art that works directly with communities and sustainable farming.

⁸¹ The right to control and share seeds locally, protecting seeds from privatisation.

⁸² Seed sovereignty refers to the right to control and share seeds locally, protecting seeds from privatisation.

⁸³ A process of “learning through doing”.

▷ CASE STUDY

TEATAR OD SOLI, CROATIA

Founded in 2011, Teatar od soli (Theatre of Salt) is a Croatian NGO that develops participatory and interdisciplinary projects based on long-term community collaboration. The organisation is particularly recognised for its sustained collaboration with Ugljan Psychiatric Hospital, where patients co-create texts and perform in performing arts productions. Importantly, participants are positioned as actors and authors. The organisation has developed its own working methodology adapted to the specific characteristics of participants, all people undergoing long-term treatment, including individuals with psychosis, schizophrenia and addiction. The approach is based on gradual building of safety and trust within the group using body, voice, and non-verbal communication as



Photo: Children - Teatar od soli

tools of expression, and working through improvisation to co-create material through collaborative writing and collective storytelling. The pace and intensity of the work are adapted to the needs of participants, emphasising creative expression as a space of empowerment, dignity, and social inclusion. Within the wider Balkan context, marked by post-conflict legacies, underfunded welfare infrastructures, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health, such initiatives frequently compensate for structural gaps in mental healthcare. Yet Teatar od soli faces ongoing constraints, including the absence of formal policy frameworks integrating cultural practice into mental health systems, which affects funding availability and recognition.

RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITIES

We define “community” in SEA work as a group of people linked by a shared connection.⁸⁴ That connection can be many things: a geographical place, space, interest, value, identity, need or circumstance. Communities exist in many diverse forms, compositions, layers and intersections, and have varying degrees of continuity.⁸⁵

SEA organisations work with communities across this spectrum and are **significantly engaged in supporting groups of people typically underrepresented in civic decision-making.**

Amongst surveyed organisations, youth is the most frequent group, followed by economically disadvantaged people, women, refugees, migrants and diaspora communities.

Among “Other” responses, a third pointed out a difficulty in identifying specific categories of audience as they work with extremely diversified groups of people. 19% identified “local communities” as a target group, adapting their activities to the needs of citizens rather than pre-identifying a group to focus on. 19% work with artists, creative people and cultural workers, and a smaller number of respondents (5% or less) reported working with rural communities, people who suffer from mental distress, vulnerable families, people affected by addiction, and those affected by environmental challenges.

Fig. 7: Percentage of surveyed organisations working with specific target groups⁸⁶



⁸⁴ Bell, C. and Newby, H. (2021). Community Studies: An Introduction to the Sociology of the Local Community. London: Routledge.

⁸⁵ Bartleet, B.-L. (2023). A conceptual framework for understanding and articulating the social impact of community music. International Journal of Community Music, 16(1), 31-49.

⁸⁶ Respondents could select unlimited categories.

The majority of these communities are engaged as active participants and/or audiences, with 85% of surveyed organisations involving communities directly in the design and development of their activities through co-creative practices. There is a clear trend showing that SEA practices enable the shift from arts and cultural participation as a form of consumption, towards redistributing the power to shape culture to communities, through co-creation, co-authorship and community-led approaches.⁸⁷

While engaging communities as participants or audiences is a nearly universal practice across all regions, some geographical trends emerge regarding more active forms of involvement. Northern Europe stands out with 100% of surveyed organisations in the region engaging their communities as volunteers. Western and Eastern European SEA organisations show the highest adoption of co-creation practices (91% and 86% respectively), and Western European SEA organisations share governance more than in other regions, with 50% involving communities as decision-making bodies.

While co-creation and audience participation are highly prevalent across all organisational sizes, a larger workforce seems to facilitate more complex forms of community engagement. The involvement of communities as decision-making bodies rises from 35% of organisations with fewer than 10 staff members to 52% of those with more than 30. Similarly, the percentage of organisations that rely on volunteers increases as the team grows, peaking at 60% for mid-sized and large entities.

Community-Led Governance

38% of surveyed organisations involve communities as formal decision-making bodies. Small-to-medium-sized organisations are the main promoters of community-led governance, and staff capacity makes a difference to whether an organisation is able to sustain community collaboration at this level.⁸⁹

Fig. 8: The scale of participation in arts and culture⁸⁸



⁸⁷ The way that participation is currently measured at the European level suggesting that this is the primary way that cultural participation is valued.

⁸⁸ An adaptation of Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969) which categorises forms of participation according to the degree of citizen power in decision-making. It is widely used to distinguish between superficial engagement and genuine co-decision or shared governance, highlighting that not all forms of "participation" entail meaningful influence over outcomes. See: Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224.

⁸⁹ Organisations with mid-range financial capacities (€100,000 to €1 million) are the main drivers of community-led governance and volunteerism. The involvement of communities as decision-making bodies rises from 35% of organisations with fewer than 10 staff members to 52% of those with more than 30.

Table 4: How communities are involved in decision-making in SEA organisations

APPROACH	HOW COMMUNITIES ARE INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING
 1. Community Representation on Governing Bodies Communities shape strategy and oversight.	• Community members sit on boards or steering committees. • They influence mission, priorities, policies, and evaluation. • Ensures accountability and legitimacy.
 2. Co-Leadership and Shared Power Communities lead alongside staff and artists.	• Community co-leads direct programmes and strategy. • Power and resources are shared, not just consulted. • Builds equity and long-term capacity.
 3. Participatory Programme Design Communities decide what is created and how.	• Communities identify needs, set priorities, and shape activities. • Methods include workshops, design labs, and co-creation. • Ensures relevance and responsiveness.
 4. Community-led Resource Allocation Communities decide how resources are used.	• Community panels or assemblies decide on funding. • Supports grassroots initiatives and local priorities. • Increases equity and trust.
 5. Community Assemblies or Panels Communities deliberate and make collective decisions.	• Regular forums to discuss, decide, and guide direction. • Can advise or hold formal decision-making power. • Strengthens democratic engagement.
 6. Community-led Evaluation and Learning Communities define success and assess impact.	• Communities set metrics and lead evaluation. • Centres lived experience and local knowledge. • Informs continuous improvement.
 7. Asset-based and Community Ownership Models Communities own and steward projects or organisations.	• Communities initiate and govern projects or organisations. • SEA organisations provide support, not control. • Ensures sustainability and self-determination.
Key Point: In SEA community engagement often involves transferring decision-making power, meaning communities are not just heard, but are the ones who decide.	

➤ CASE STUDY

NEW ART EXCHANGE'S VOICE ASSEMBLY, UNITED KINGDOM

New Art Exchange's VOICE Assembly

marked a world-first in cultural leadership: a permanent citizen assembly embedded at the heart of an arts institution's governance. In a bold commitment to redistribute power, the initiative positions residents of Hyson Green in Nottingham as co-leaders shaping the organisation's strategic direction.

The assembly brings together 40 local citizens, selected by civic lottery to ensure fairness, diversity, and genuine representation. These members form one pillar of New Art Exchange's three-Pillar leadership model, working alongside the executive team and board of trustees. Their role is to articulate community aspirations, influence programming and commissioning, and help steer long-term cultural priorities for the neighbourhood. Membership of the VOICE Assembly is renewed every two years, ensuring fresh perspectives and continued inclusivity.

By embedding citizen leadership permanently, New Art Exchange aims to create a blueprint for culturally legitimate governance — one that strengthens trust, relevance, and accountability between institutions and the communities they serve. Since embedding the assembly, New Art Exchange has deepened trust (overall local engagement has grown by 20%) and strengthened financial resilience (reserves have quadrupled and core funding has increased by nearly 50%). Leaders across the UK's cultural sector, including Arts Council England,⁹⁰ have highlighted the VOICE Assembly as a pioneering model for how cultural organisations can deepen participation and reimagine



Photo: Voice Assembly New Art Exchange. Photo Credit Tom Morley

power-sharing, offering a live example of how neighbourhood communities can meaningfully shape the cultural life around them.

Citizens in Power Network is a three-year national initiative (2025–2027), co-founded by New Art Exchange's artistic director, Saad-Eddine Said, and David Jubb. It brings together 75 organisations, practitioners, local authorities, and community leaders to rethink decision-making in the cultural and creative sectors. It trials more equitable, citizen-led models of cultural governance, using mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies, juries, and civic lotteries (defining "citizens" as all who live, work, or stay in a place). These operate through a structured process of evidence-sharing, deliberation, and consensus-building to produce recommendations, grounded in principles of authority-giving, civic lottery, and deliberation.

Through workshops, residencies, and action learning, the network develops practical models for embedding citizen participation in cultural programming, strategy, funding, and institutional accountability, involving organisations such as Birmingham Museums Trust alongside grassroots groups and local authorities.



Photo: CIP Network 1 - Photo credit James Allan

⁹⁰ What's On In Nottingham. (2024, April 9). Voice of the People: New Art Exchange leads with first-ever permanent citizen assembly in cultural leadership. https://www.whatsoninnottingham.com/voice-of-the-people-new-art-exchange-leads-with-first-ever-permanent-citizen-assembly-in-cultural-leadership/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

EVALUATING IMPACT

EVIDENCE, LEARNING, IMPACT

For SEA organisations, accountability relationships are plural. They are accountable to funders through reporting and evaluation mechanisms, to communities through relational commitments, and to peers in the interest of learning and improvement. These overlapping accountability structures influence organisational priorities and practices, necessitating ongoing dialogue between artistic autonomy, civic responsibility and institutional expectations.⁹¹ At the heart of this plural accountability is the practice of evaluation.

The majority of SEA organisations who contributed to this research attribute great importance to the evaluation of their activities, and their drive to do so is predominantly driven by two intrinsic motivations: to better understand the effects of their work and to foster a learning culture within their institution.

External motivations, like the necessity to provide insights to funders, are present but much less powerful drivers for evaluation, especially amongst smaller, younger organisations.⁹² This suggests that organisations less burdened by institutional reporting requirements are more disposed to employing evaluation as a learning tool, rather than an accountability exercise.

Evaluation is mostly conducted in-house using predominantly qualitative methods.

The methodologies used by organisations suggest that qualitative approaches are more suited to capturing the impact of SEA activities, with surveys, informal chats, focus groups or a mix of these methodologies being the preferred approach. Evaluation tends to become more structured over time, and as the size and budget of organisations increases and stabilises. Very few surveyed organisations, usually the largest in terms

of budget and size, outsource evaluation to external providers.

Some organisations conduct evaluation across the organisation, while for others, evaluation is conducted on a project-by-project basis, depending on resources, staff capacity and requests from funders.

The most frequent reasons for SEA organisations not evaluating their work are a lack of expertise or resources and time constraints. This is most acute amongst organisations with annual budgets under €50,000 and small teams, where organisations report a lack of expertise and resources as barriers to more systematic evaluation. Given that the majority of SEA organisations are small-to-medium-sized entities, these findings suggest that capacity building and appropriate funding for evaluation would enable more organisations to effectively capture their impact as both a learning and advocacy tool

Evolving SEA Evaluation Approaches

Evaluation and evidence production are central yet contested aspects of the SEA field. Given that the value of SEA lies not only in individual project outputs but in their relational and systemic outcomes, evaluation practices predominantly favour qualitative and narrative approaches.

Recent research in SEA and arts-based research has shed light on evaluation approaches that are integrated directly into the artistic process, rather than applied externally after completion. In these frameworks, the act of creating — whether through performance, visual arts, sound, or participatory practices — functions simultaneously as method, inquiry, and evaluative tool. This approach shifts the notion of evaluation from external metrics to process-oriented, reflective, and participatory methods, where artists, participants, and audiences cease to

⁹¹ Jancovich, L., and Borch, (2024) A. Norms and storms in cultural participation: a conversation between Leila Jancovich and Alice Borch. *Conjunctions*, 12(1).

⁹² Accountability to funders was cited by only 9% of surveyed organisations with annual budgets under €50,000, but this rose to 25% in the highest budget range (over €5 million). Only 6% of the youngest organizations (founded after 2021) conduct impact assessments to provide insights to funders, this proportion rises to 16% for more established organisations (founded before 2010).

be objects of measurement; they are active makers whose experiences and interactions contribute to understanding impact.⁹³

These embedded approaches are often aligned with action research and practice-led research, in which cycles of making, reflecting, and iterating provide ongoing evaluation. Such methodologies challenge traditional evaluation paradigms by prioritising context, process, and relational outcomes over standardised metrics.⁹⁴

In arts-based research specifically, artistic creation is positioned as a research methodology, where the resulting artefacts (visual, performative, or narrative) act as both data and interpretive lens. Evaluation occurs naturally through the iterative process of creation and reflection, rather than relying solely on surveys or quantitative measures.⁹⁵

Despite literature highlighting the need for value-based approaches such as these, most funding systems still require quantitative indicators,⁹⁶ and evaluation systems designed for business or public administration are often transferred directly into the cultural sector, where they do not adequately capture the nature of artistic value.

Based on practice and literature, the following trends outline how evaluation approaches can become more suited to capturing the nature of SEA impact:

1

Shifting focus from output metrics to process-oriented evaluation.

As the artistic process is often the primary site of value creation in SEA work, evaluation frameworks designed to capture how the artistic process unfolds and the impacts that emerge throughout it tend to more successfully capture the complex social impacts that happen through co-creation and dialogue. Iterative evaluation — which is embedded in the process, rather than a post-project intervention that primarily captures quantitative outputs such as attendance or deliverables — follows the process in real time, gathering insights as it unfolds rather than after completion.⁹⁷ This allows for the capture of emergent and more nuanced experiences, personal and collective changes, such as:

- quality of collaboration and dialogue
- participant engagement and agency
- different steps or stages of change and development
- learning and reflection throughout the process
- adaptability and iterative development

⁹³ Labaronne, L. (2018). (Re-)Evaluating the artistic and social value of the arts: towards a contextualized model. [Conference Paper] Research Colloquium.

⁹⁴ Labaronne, L., & Piber, M. (2020). Performance Measurement and Evaluation in the Arts and Cultural Sector: State-of-the-Art in Theory and Practice and Prolegomena for Further Developments. In *Management, Participation and Entrepreneurship in the Cultural and Creative Sector* (pp. 219-240). Springer.

⁹⁵ Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.

⁹⁶ Ferrero, M. (2025). *Artists beyond the market. The case of independent art spaces and their role in contemporary society* [Doctoral dissertation]. Università degli Studi "Magna Græcia" di Catanzaro. <https://zenodo.org/records/18010682>

⁹⁷ Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. The Guilford Press.

2

Measuring relational and complex social outcomes.

To effectively capture and understand the depth of SEA impact, funding frameworks are increasingly encouraged to shift focus from fixed “outputs” — such as number of participants — to qualitative metrics that account for relational and complex social outcomes inherent to SEA practice, such as: community cohesion, trust-building, empowerment and voice, new social networks or partnerships, civic participation and ecological sustainability. These outcomes are often dynamic, non-linear and constantly evolving, and best understood through multi-domain evaluation approaches and frameworks that capture cultural, social, civic and personal outcomes through mixed (quantitative and qualitative) evidence, such as narrative case studies and the documentation of creative processes, alongside more standard quantitative measures. Complex social outcomes — like “community connection”, for example — can then be evidenced by triangulating multiple sources of evidence.⁹⁸

3

Prioritising and expanding the validity of qualitative and narrative evidence.

Expanding the definition of what constitutes legitimate evidence is key to valuing diverse forms of knowledge and knowledge creation in SEA evaluation. By assigning equal value to qualitative evidence that captures how SEA organisations valorise the lived experience of communities, enable meaning-making and create the conditions for transformation, evaluation can begin to capture complex and systemic impacts that quantitative indicators often miss.⁹⁹ Examples of qualitative evidence include: participant testimonies, reflective journals, facilitated reflection sessions, and artistic documentation.

4

Designing context-sensitive evaluation.

Research emphasises that SEA evaluation systems benefit from being adaptable to specific artistic and social contexts, rather than working from standard or uniform indicators.¹⁰⁰ Rigid evaluation templates can discourage experimentation and risk perpetuating misconceptions about the value of SEA practices by failing to evidence the more fundamental artistic and social outcomes generated in the process.¹⁰¹ They also risk creating conflict between the necessity for SEA initiatives to be responsive to community needs that emerge through the process, and the expectation to conform to pre-determined outcomes and outputs. These risks can be overcome when funders co-design evaluation frameworks and project indicators with SEA practitioners that take the cultural, social, and geographic context into consideration.

5

Supporting participatory and co-produced evaluation.

When evaluation includes participants and communities in the process of developing evaluation tools, processes, and interpreting outcomes, they cease to be subjects of measurement and become co-creators of insight, knowledge and learning.¹⁰² This levels power dynamics and legitimises community-held knowledge and experience, opening evaluation processes up to a diversity of perspectives that overcome evaluator bias and bring a richness of insight and learning to the process. Methodologies that support the co-production of evaluation include:

⁹⁸ Dunphy, K. (2015). A Holistic Framework for Evaluation of Arts Engagement. In L. Macdowall, M. Badham, E. Blomkamp, & K. Dunphy (Eds.), *Making Culture Count: The Politics of Cultural Measurement* (pp. 243–263). Palgrave Macmillan.

⁹⁹ Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2023). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications.

¹⁰⁰ Labaronne, L., & Piber, M. (2020). Performance Measurement and Evaluation in the Arts and Cultural Sector: State-of-the-Art in Theory and Practice and Prolegomena for Further Developments. In M. Piber (Ed.), *Management, Participation and Entrepreneurship in the Cultural and Creative Sector* (pp. 219–240). Springer.

¹⁰¹ McGuigan, J. (2004). *Understanding Cultural Policy*. Open University Press.

¹⁰² Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2023).

- reflective workshops with participants
- storytelling and narrative evaluation
- participant-generated documentation (photos, diaries, artworks)
- collaborative interpretation of outcomes

6

Funding evaluation as part of the artistic process.

It's important to recognise and fund evaluation as an embedded component of SEA practice, not merely post-project reporting. Embedded and qualitative approaches to evaluation require time, resources, and methodological support. Organisations and funders need to ensure that evaluation is budgeted for within projects and, ideally, the organisation's core budget to enable a consistent and iterative learning cycle that can support the organisation's artistic and methodological development and help them stay accountable to both communities and funders. Supporting research partnerships between SEA organisations and academic institutions can be an effective way to fill gaps in SEA organisational capacity, resources, knowledge and skills relating to evaluation processes, as well as contributing to scholarship in the field.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH

The role of research in defining, legitimising and advancing the SEA field has been recurrent throughout the report, and intersects with the needs of organisations as well as wider field-building recommendations.

Research, Evaluation and Funding

Systematic inquiry — including evaluation, documentation, and theory building — generates the conceptual frameworks and evidence base that make SEA legible to policymakers, funders, cultural institutions and communities, enabling organisations to articulate their contributions to society.¹⁰³ Arts-based research, which integrates artistic practice and scholarly inquiry, embodies this intersection by using creative methods not only to study but also to enact and “rehearse” knowledge and knowledge production, supporting reflection and critical understanding within projects themselves rather than treating evaluation as an external “add-on”.¹⁰⁴ In practice, research partnerships often involve artist-researchers, community participants and academic evaluators working collaboratively to design, monitor and assess SEA interventions, creating iterative feedback loops that enhance project relevance, rigour and responsiveness. Crucially, collaboration between research institutions and SEA organisations creates access to funding opportunities at the EU level, through project funding streams like Horizon 2020 and national and international research councils, for example.

Higher Education and Professionalisation

Higher education institutions are increasingly formalising SEA-related specialisations, recognising the profession’s distinct competencies and methodological demands compared to other strands of arts education. These structured academic courses span community engagement, participatory facilitation, project design and critical reflection.¹⁰⁵ Such programmes — found across departments of fine art, community art, social practice and arts education — contribute to the professionalisation of the field by developing practitioner expertise and methodological literacy, establishing knowledge communities, and cultivating future leaders and educators who can sustain and evolve SEA practices. Curricula informed by arts-based research and participatory pedagogy prepare students to navigate complex ethical, cultural and social dimensions of SEA work, while embedding reflective, practice-led research at the core of professional formation.¹⁰⁶ By integrating research, pedagogy and practice, higher education strengthens the field’s intellectual foundations and builds organisational capacity across SEA organisations, supporting more robust, evidence-informed practice that is recognised within broader cultural, educational and policy ecosystems.

¹⁰³ Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts Based Research*. SAGE Publications.

¹⁰⁴ Wang, Q., Coemans, S., Siegesmund, R., & Hannes, K. (2017). Arts-based Methods in Socially Engaged Research Practice: A Classification Framework. *Art/Research International*, 2(2), 5-39.

¹⁰⁵ Lehtikainen, K., & Siljamäki, E. (2023). Socially Engaged Arts (SEA) Practices: Key Skills and Capabilities. *Research in Arts and Education*, 3, 7-26.

¹⁰⁶ Raykov, M., & Vella, R. (2021). Ethics Reviews in Socially Engaged Arts Research. *Research in Arts & Education*, 2021(3), 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.119543>.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

CHALLENGES

This research reveals a field operating under significant structural pressure, where ambitions related to participation, inclusion, and social transformation are consistently confronted by financial, institutional, and political constraints.

The challenges we mapped through a mixture of self-reporting and desk research can be loosely categorised into three areas: the day-to-day operations of running an SEA organisation; how SEA organisations are perceived and valued; and the social context they operate in. A more detailed exploration of these challenges can be read in the [Supplement to this report](#).

Organisational Challenges

Funding and Policy Alignment



“Nonprofit and for-profit cultural and creative organizations continue to face structural funding challenges. While traditional philanthropic and non repayable sources, including grants, subsidies and sponsorships, remain essential, their limitations significantly risk the long-term sustainability, scalability, and international expansion of organizations in the cultural and creative industries.”

— Deloitte Art & Finance Report 2025, 9th Edition¹⁰⁷

Funding is SEA organisations’ greatest challenge, connected to a structural mismatch between policy and funding frameworks and organisational needs across Europe.¹⁰⁸ At the heart of this tension is the predominance of short-term, output-driven project funding, which fails to support the relational, process-oriented, and long-term nature of SEA. The scarcity of core and multi-annual funding undermines organisational stability, strategic planning, and staff retention, reinforcing structural precarity and limiting available time for in-depth relationship building, which is critical to project development and fundraising.¹⁰⁹ Administrative burdens, rigid reporting requirements, and highly competitive funding environments intensify this misalignment, particularly for smaller, grassroots organisations.¹¹⁰

Funding challenges are exacerbated for some SEA organisations due to the fact that they sit between two funding logics: arts funding frameworks (focused on artistic or cultural value) and social and environmental policy frameworks (focused on measurable social impact, inclusion, and regeneration outcomes).¹¹¹ While organisations and funders are experimenting with alternative business models and funding infrastructure, these practices are not yet scalable across the field, highlighting the need for capacity building in SEA-specific financial planning and sustainability strategies.

Workforce Challenges

Research has increasingly highlighted that SEA labour depends on personal commitment, emotional investment and identification with organisational missions, often in precarious conditions with limited

¹⁰⁷ Giulio, F. & Patton Power, A. (2025).

¹⁰⁸ Funding was cited as a challenge by 79% of survey respondents, and only 22% of survey respondents reported policy and funding alignment with their work. While some policies formally acknowledge participatory and community-oriented objectives, respondents frequently report a persistent gap between strategic rhetoric and operational support, resulting in only partial alignment.

¹⁰⁹ The most vulnerable group within our survey were mid-sized organisations with annual budgets between €500,000 and €1 million (over 90% reported funding difficulties). These organisations are large enough to run structured programmes but lack sufficient reserves for stability. Financial resilience improves alongside capacity: organisations over €1 million and at least 30 members of staff report lower financial difficulties.

¹¹⁰ Organisational capacity does seem to make a difference: the proportion of organisations reporting full alignment grows as budgets and staff numbers increase, suggesting that funding and policymaking frameworks are designed to better suit larger, more institutionalised organisations. This provides an additional layer of insight into why so many SEA organisations feel a lack of full alignment, given that the majority of the field is made up of small, grassroots organisations.

¹¹¹ For more detail on this, see Funding and Policymaking.

recognition.¹¹² Burnout is a major concern in the SEA workforce, stemming from high relational demands, precarious employment, and limited resourcing.¹¹³ Practitioners often juggle multiple responsibilities — project management, facilitation, fundraising, and evaluation — alongside intensive community engagement, which can lead to role strain and reduced focus on core artistic and social practice.¹¹⁴ Professional development, mentorship, and methodological training remain scarce, limiting skill growth and career progression.¹¹⁵ SEA work frequently involves vulnerable populations or sensitive social issues, exposing practitioners to ethical and emotional risks.¹¹⁶ Smaller or regionally based organisations face professional isolation and reduced access to peer networks, training, or collaborative opportunities.¹¹⁷ Structural inequalities further compound workforce precarity, with female and minority practitioners disproportionately affected by low pay, insecure contracts, and limited recognition.¹¹⁸ Addressing these challenges requires sustainable funding, organisational support, and targeted professional development to mitigate burnout, retain talent, and strengthen SEA capacity.¹¹⁹

Access to Space

Organisations report difficulties in accessing affordable, permanent, and appropriate spaces for artistic and community-based work. Temporary leases, high rental costs, and limited public investment in cultural infrastructure undermine continuity and expansion.

Perception Challenges

Recognition and Visibility

More than one-third of the respondents reported a lack of awareness and acknowledgement of SEA within the wider arts and cultural sector and among policymakers. They highlighted misconceptions about the value and impact of their work, difficulties in gaining media attention, the struggle to establish legitimacy and credibility in both local and international contexts, and the difficulty of demonstrating impact and securing long-term alliances. As with funding, mid-size organisations suffer this most acutely, suggesting a structural vulnerability associated with this stage of organisational growth.

Stigma

Meanwhile, reported cultural and social stigmas reveal persistent perceptions that diminish the legitimacy of artistic labour, particularly in socially sensitive fields such as healthcare or mental wellbeing. Ageism, methodological prejudice, and the trivialisation of art as a “hobby” undermine professional recognition. This was also connected to fair pay and remuneration: SEA practitioners and organisations reported encountering expectations from non-cultural partners and institutions that they would “do more for less” given their artistic motivation for the work, as if this was a form of compensation.

¹¹² Ferrero, M. (2025).

¹¹³ Gordon, R. & White, N. (2025). Emotional labour of social practice artists: moving towards sustainable collective care. *The Burlington Magazine*. <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/emotional-labour-of-social-practice-artists-moving-towards-sustainable-collective-care>

¹¹⁴ Kester, G. H. (2011). *The One and the Many*.

¹¹⁵ Lehtikoinen, K and Siljamäki, E. (2023).

¹¹⁶ Vella, R. and Pulè, M. (2002). Who is it for? Art and social practice in a time of slow burn crisis. *Routledge Open Res*, 1:23.

¹¹⁷ Goodwin, K. Pekarek, A. (2025). Beyond the Audience: Rethinking Stakeholder Engagement in the Arts and Cultural Sector. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, 55(6), 380-398.

¹¹⁸ Cox, M. (2022). Understanding Socially Engaged Arts as Discourse and Experience: Discursive structures of inequality, and art and experience. Doctoral Thesis. Birmingham City University.

¹¹⁹ Allegrini, G., & Carlone, T. (2025). Spaces of Resistance of Participatory Arts in Cultural Welfare Initiatives. *Insight of Italian Case Studies. SocietàMutamentoPolitica*, 16(32), 161-171.

Contextual Challenges

Political and Social Instability

Political and social challenges were cited by 30% of respondents, reflecting how broader instability and fragility shape SEA practice in context-specific ways. Despite this being one of the most prominently cited challenges, it was also the one that organisations felt least empowered to respond to. Recurring themes include political instability, polarisation, nationalism, and the rise of the far right, with impacts ranging from funding constraints to direct threats.

Despite these pressures, many SEA organisations adopt an explicitly critical stance, positioning their work in opposition to exclusionary or violent socio-political dynamics. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of more inclusive and humane social realities, often at significant personal and organisational risk — a dimension of political vulnerability that remains insufficiently recognised within existing support frameworks.

Cuts to Public Services

SEA organisations in some regions highlighted the impact of losing vital public services, such as youth provision, elderly care services and mental health services. As these public services are cut, SEA organisations are increasingly holding long-term relationships, trusted spaces and forms of support that go well beyond what arts organisations would traditionally be expected to provide. This places both opportunity and pressure on the field: SEA are recognised as powerful connectors and catalysts, while being expected to respond to complex social needs without the resources or recognition afforded to statutory services.

This challenge underscores the need for greater visibility and recognition of the SEA field for its full value, while also reinforcing the importance of healthy social infrastructure being valued in and of itself, whether built through arts-based or community-led approaches, or through traditional public services.



Photo: Natia Chikvaidze performing at THE BLUE OF HIGH ZENITHS queer and feminist performance art festival, Tbilisi 2024. Photo by KOI.

▸ CASE STUDY

UNTITLED TBILISI, GEORGIA

Founded in 2019 in Tbilisi, untitled tbilisi defines itself as an art and community organisation uniting artists and activists from the South Caucasus to support women, queer, and other marginalised groups through regional and international art projects. It operates within Georgia's fragile democracy, characterised by political volatility, conservative nationalism, and escalating hostility toward LGBTQ+ communities. In recent years, shrinking civic space and intensified anti-gender rhetoric have increasingly targeted independent civil society actors, positioning queer and feminist initiatives at the centre of cultural and political contestation. In this context, untitled tbilisi frames art as a vehicle for peace-building and socio-political transformation. Through festivals, exhibitions, performances, screenings, and educational programmes, it advances human rights discourse and creates platforms for communities that are frequently excluded from institutional representation. In an environment where public institutions often fail to provide safe or supportive environments, cultural spaces function as alternative infrastructures of protection, self-expression, and knowledge production. Similar dynamics have been observed in neighbouring Armenia, where art initiatives compensate for institutional gaps by creating protective and discursive spaces.

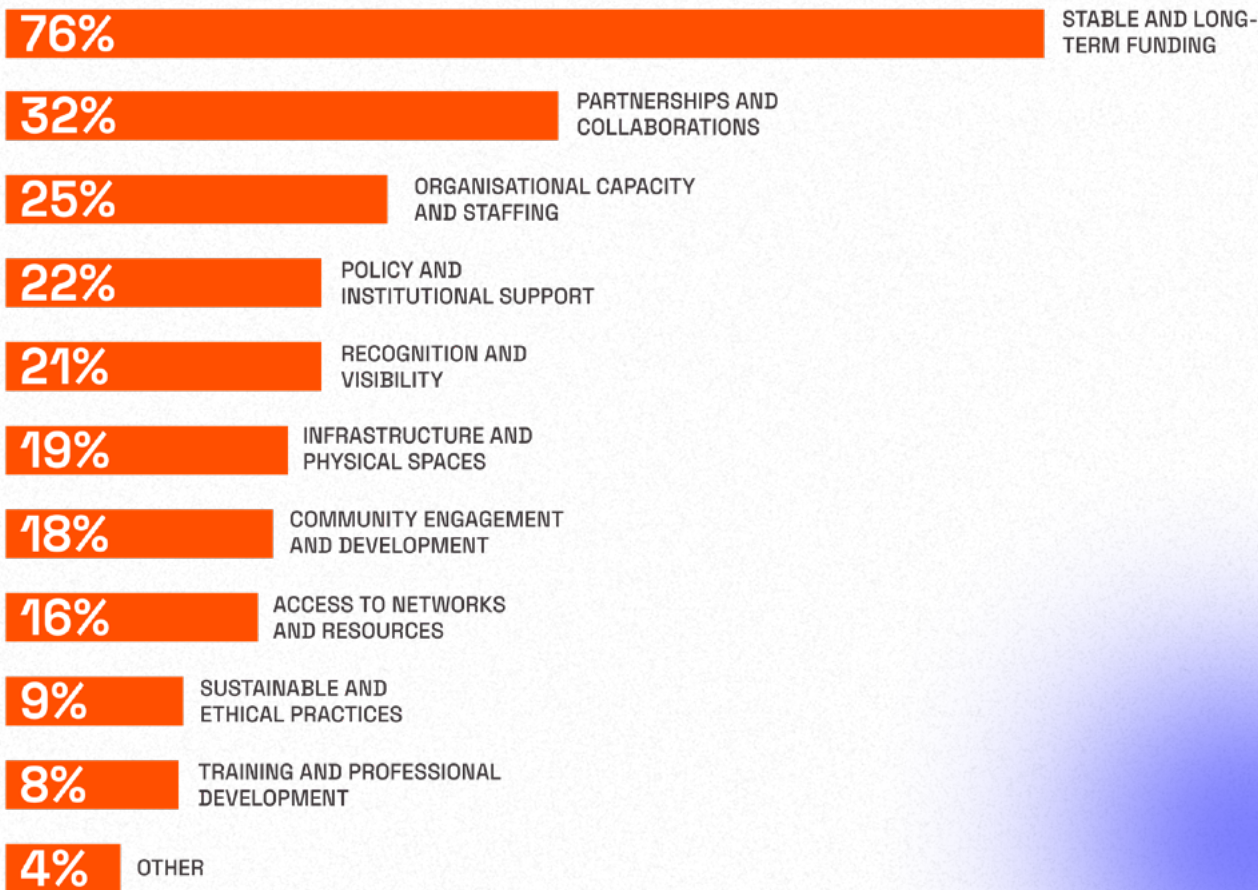
At the same time, the organisation operates under acute precarity. It reports being publicly stigmatised as a “foreign agent” and “LGBT propagandist,” reflecting governmental attempts to delegitimise internationally connected civil society. Long-term institutional funding from public bodies in Georgia and the South Caucasus is largely absent. Available grants are short-term and project-based, and while long-term, unrestricted funding exists through international foundations, these opportunities are limited, highly competitive, and often accessible only through invitation-based calls. At the same time, regional funding frameworks prioritise technocratic development agendas over cultural work. Funding in general is almost inaccessible due to the restrictive political framework, and civil society organisations are required to invent strategies to be able to receive support. Within this politically hostile and resource-constrained environment, untitled tbilisi exemplifies how socially engaged arts organisations in the South Caucasus function as civil society infrastructures, generating cultural visibility, regional solidarity, and political resistance while navigating criminalisation, funding scarcity, and systemic risk.

NEEDS

SEA organisations present a clear hierarchy of priorities, strongly centred on structural stability and institutional consolidation. Notably, these priorities closely mirror the challenges previously identified: stable funding, institutional recognition, strengthened capacity, and supportive policy frameworks. It is clear that the obstacles organisations face in the present are systematically reflected in the conditions they consider necessary for future sustainability and growth.

Overall, we are observing the needs of a predominantly grassroots field of practice experiencing demand and perceiving opportunity to scale up. This is being encouraged by policy, but without the practical alignment of resources required to enable this. The needs here may seem all-encompassing, but in the detail, they express a genuine will and commitment to professionalisation, adaptation in the face of rapidly changing contexts, and scaling both the depth and reach of practice to meet the social needs that SEA organisations are uniquely positioned to address.

Fig. 9: The needs of SEA organisations to thrive into the future



Sustainable Funding



We're in a rare position of having relatively stable public funding, and that stability is unusual in our sector and something we really value. At the same time, those funds are being cut every year while the demands and expected results keep growing. That's why we use our public support very deliberately for longterm, socially engaged work rather than oneoff projects, and we keep diversifying our income stream — ticket income, classes and workshop fees, project funding, collaborations, including commercial act distribution and venue hire. Every fiveyear strategy we deliberately add one or two new groups and build proper infrastructure around them. That slow, steady approach means accessibility and social engagement are not side projects that disappear when a grant ends – over time they become part of how the organization itself works, even in a future where we have to do more with less.

Māra Pāvula,
Director, Rigas cirks
Lithuania

Stable and long-term funding is overwhelmingly the primary need of SEA organisations. Respondents stress the necessity of consistent, multi-year financial support that enables strategic planning, continuity, and the sustained development of long-term projects. Maintaining meaningful relationships with communities, sustaining the long-term approach that systemic change requires, and the risk of trust eroding when SEA organisations are not resourced to stay consistent, means that consistency in core funding for SEA organisations is a necessity not only for survival but for the success of every distinct project they shape, fund, and deliver with their communities.

This connects with needs related to capacity building and professionalisation, as well as more structural [recommendations](#) for funders and policymakers to design more appropriate solutions.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Organisations highlight the importance of strong and sustainable partnerships across both local and international levels, particularly with universities and the cultural sector. Collaborative networks are viewed as crucial for knowledge exchange, innovation, and the amplification of social and artistic impact, and there is a desire to scale SEA networks more widely. There was a specific call for more equitable partnerships across regions with asymmetrical resources, suggesting the adoption of a more systemic view on resource distribution to organisations working in less developed SEA ecosystems.

Advocacy

Organisations highlight the need to build relationships and gain visibility across a broad range of stakeholders (policymakers, media, and the wider public in general) in order to consolidate recognition for their work and expand their reach. This is while deepening community relationships, building sustained participation and ensuring that community-based artistic practices remain central to their identity. Given the average size of SEA organisations, the need to achieve this breadth of reach aligns with the desire to build sustainable collaborative platforms for collective advocacy and resource-sharing mechanisms across organisations, both locally and internationally.

Organisational Capacity and Staffing

Expanding staff numbers, securing full-time roles, and building well-structured teams are perceived as central to future growth and stability. Training and professional development are seen as a means to address organisational challenges by building staff capacity. This is particularly in the context of (a) a field that is still establishing itself, having been for many years purposefully operating outside of institutional settings and largely unrecognised in policy and funding frameworks, and (b) communities facing ever-evolving complex needs as populations shift and emerging environmental and geopolitical issues intensify. Specific needs highlighted were:

- SEA-specific financial planning and sustainability strategies, targeted to different stages of organisational development.
- Peer-learning across the field to share best practice, common challenges and innovations, to enable the continued development of SEA organisations to respond to complex community challenges.
- Training in effective collaboration for both artists and staff, to enable more efficient local and international collaborations across cultures and different disciplines.
- Training SEA practitioners to work in domain-specific settings, such as health, to support growing organisational scale and impact among SEA organisations that have successfully established themselves in a particular domain.
- Training for SEA practitioners in conflict and peacebuilding contexts to support them in delivering their work more safely and effectively.

● Training in environmental and eco-social practices to respond effectively to increasingly urgent climate impacts.

● Training in ethical practices for organisations and practitioners to navigate blurred boundaries around care and responsibility more consciously.

● “Training the trainers” to learn how to use SEA organisations’ methodology and scale up the practice in other communities and countries.

Given the scale of need, some interviewees suggested that training formats in general need to be rethought to enable access and ensure that capacity building can enrich the field at scale in the precarious circumstances signalled as a core challenge.¹²⁰

Hybrid Forms of Support

There is a growing trend of capacity-building interventions that cover several of these needs by offering training, networking and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, as well as advocacy. An example is the CultureAndHealth Platform, a four-year European initiative supporting emerging artists working at the intersection of culture, health, education, and social sectors through grants, mobility, training, and networking opportunities. Led by Culture Action Europe and implemented through a multi-country partnership, the programme funds over 170 artists and provides capacity-building activities, peer-learning, and international visibility, while also strengthening cross-sector collaboration and positioning culture as a driver of health, wellbeing, and social innovation.

¹²⁰ Regarding the specialist skills in SEA methodologies and practice, in-depth research on this has been done to map the distinct competencies required for the work by Kai Lehtikainen, University of the Arts Helsinki, and Eeva Siljamäki, University of Jyväskylä, which provides an excellent starting point for the identification of what additional capacity-build priorities SEA organisations have, as well as education design.

FUNDING AND POLICYMAKING

RESOURCING THE FIELD

Funding and policymaking play significant roles in the evolution of SEA practices. In a field that lacks consistent definition across countries and policy areas, SEA initiatives are often shaped in response to funding frameworks and calls for project proposals that provide the resources needed to sustain community-oriented work over time. Likewise, policymaking consolidates evidence of SEA impact into recommendations that cement ideas about the nature of SEA impact and shape funding programmes. Both areas wield significant power and influence over a field that does not always fit comfortably into the structured — and siloed — ways that much funding infrastructure and policy discourse is currently organised.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS IN POLICY PRODUCTION

SEA policy generation is geographically uneven.¹²¹ Anglophone countries — including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada — dominate SEA-related discourse, reflecting long-standing traditions of community arts, well-developed participatory governance, and mature funding infrastructures. The United Kingdom exemplifies a mature institutionalisation of SEA: the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), arms-length arts councils, and infrastructures like the Taking Part survey enable systematic articulation, measurement, and evaluation of participatory practices. UK policy has served as a laboratory for co-creation and community-oriented frameworks, explaining the higher visibility of SEA documentation

from this context.

Within Europe, SEA policy discourse is most visible in Western and Northern countries — the UK, Ireland, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden — where institutional frameworks support participatory cultural practices. Southern Europe shows moderate visibility, and Eastern Europe remains comparatively underrepresented. This uneven distribution reflects differences in welfare-state models, participatory governance cultures, policy-reporting infrastructures, and funding ecosystems. In less documented regions, SEA often exist at grassroots levels, embedded within alternative policy domains, or under different terminologies, suggesting that formal recognition underestimates actual SEA activity.

However, traces of SEA exist in policy, even in underrepresented regions. In Southern and Eastern Europe, heritage policies increasingly foreground the role of communities in interpreting and safeguarding cultural heritage.¹²² In Türkiye, programmes such as the İKSV Ortaklaşa initiative explicitly aim to foster dialogue and inclusive participation between cultural institutions, civil society, and local communities, reflecting a growing emphasis on community-oriented cultural engagement.¹²³ Similarly, in Azerbaijan, national cultural policy has increasingly supported projects initiated by NGOs and civil society, signalling state recognition of community-driven cultural development and participation.¹²⁴ In the Nordic and Baltic regions, cultural policies rooted in cultural rights and democracy have long prioritised access and participatory practices, and institutions are expected to facilitate collaborative cultural production

¹²¹ To map SEA presence in policymaking, the policy database Overton (www.overton.io) was queried for the term “Socially Engaged Art”. Overton is the world’s largest searchable repository of policy documents, guidelines, think tank publications, and working papers. It aggregates material from governments, public bodies, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, and research institutes across 193 countries, covering nearly 44,000 organisations worldwide. The search returned over 90,000 policy documents.

¹²² Dragičević Šešić, M., & Dragojević, S. (2005). Arts management in turbulent times. European Cultural Foundation; Bortolotto, C. (2015). UNESCO, cultural heritage, and outstanding universal value: value-based analyses of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(5), 528–530.

¹²³ İstanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı (İKSV). (2023). Ortaklaşa: Kültür, Diyalog ve Destek Programı. İstanbul: İKSV. <https://ortaklasa.iksv.org/en/about>.

¹²⁴ Council of Europe / ERICarts Institute. (2025). Compendium of Cultural Policies & Trends in Europe: Azerbaijan country profile. <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/database/search-by-country/country-profile/?id=4>.

and inclusive engagement.¹²⁵ Overall, these examples demonstrate that **participation and community engagement are core priorities across Europe and neighbouring regions**, positioning SEA practice as a central and continent-wide trend in contemporary cultural policy.

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and EU institutions also produce significant policy outputs, sometimes exceeding national volumes, indicating that SEA are increasingly embedded in transnational governance frameworks rather than confined to national cultural policy agendas. Culture is consistently linked to societal priorities such as human rights,¹²⁶ education, health, social innovation,¹²⁷ and local development.¹²⁸ EU cultural policy has consistently linked culture to broader processes of social integration and citizenship, presenting arts and cultural activities as instruments for engaging a wide range of citizens across Europe,¹²⁹ meaning that SEA are often legible at the European level not because they are explicitly named, but because their core features resonate with policy goals around inclusion, dialogue, and civic belonging.¹³⁰ The latest Culture Compass released by the European Union reflects a gradual shift in EU cultural policy from understanding culture primarily as heritage or creative industry, toward explicitly celebrating and advocating for its role in social cohesion, democracy and community resilience.¹³¹ UNESCO frames cultural participation as a fundamental

right and a component of democratic governance.¹³² The World Health Organisation examines how arts participation can address inequalities in cultural access and contribute to prevention strategies and community wellbeing,¹³³ as well as the role of arts in addressing the health impacts of climate change.¹³⁴ Across these documents, SEA are implicitly framed as a cross-cutting approach rather than a discrete policy sector, and this makes it difficult to design implementation pathways for policy intentions and recommendations. It requires a transversal approach to policymaking, especially at the national level, which is not the norm.

This SEA-specific challenge intersects with a wider block to consistent SEA recognition and resource distribution: **there is a significant gap between policy and implementation** across Europe, and at the global level.¹³⁵ This reflects the experience of SEA organisations, who report at best a “partial” alignment between policies and funding frameworks related to their work.¹³⁶ In the following sections, we explore some of the drivers influencing this gap, as well as case studies of innovation, to inform recommendations later in the report.

PUBLIC FUNDING

Public funding makes up the majority of SEA funding, but public investment in culture remains persistently low, and

¹²⁵ Kangas, A., & Vestheim, G. (2010). Institutionalism and cultural policy change in the Nordic countries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16(1), 19–33.

¹²⁶ Mitter, B. (2025). A retrospective view on the union’s cultural policy: The commission’s objectives in distributing project funds across Europe’s creative industries. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(3), 361–382.

¹²⁷ Bruell, C. (2013). Creative Europe 2014–2020: A New Programme-A New Cultural Policy As Well? DEU, 59.

¹²⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2005). *Culture and local development*. OECD.

¹²⁹ Sassatelli, M. (2007). The arts, the state, and the EU: Cultural policy in the making of Europe. *Social Analysis*, 51(1), 28–41.

¹³⁰ Kandyla, A. (2015). The creative Europe programme: policy-making dynamics and outcomes. In E. Psychogiopoulou (Eds.), *Cultural Governance and the European Union: Protecting and Promoting Cultural Diversity in Europe* (pp. 49–60). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

¹³¹ European Commission. (2025, November 12). Commission languages new Culture Compass for Europe. European Commission Press Corner. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2628

¹³² United Nations. (2016). Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights. United Nations.

¹³³ World Health Organization. (2023). WHO expert meeting on prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases: Learning from the arts. WHO.

¹³⁴ World Health Organisation. (2026). Role of the arts and culture in addressing the health impacts of climate change: Behavioural and Cultural Insights policy brief series. WHO and Jameel Arts& Health Lab.

¹³⁵ 85% of countries surveyed by UNESCO in their most recent cultural policy report integrate cultural and creative industries into national development plans, but only 56% set specific cultural goals. See: UNESCO. (2026). *Reshaping policies for creativity: we share, we act, we build*. UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000397330>

¹³⁶ See section Funding and Policy Alignment for more detail.

recent data suggest that this trend is worsening. UNESCO reports that global cultural investment has declined over the past decade,¹³⁷ while OECD¹³⁸ analysis shows that government expenditure on culture in member states has yet to recover to pre-2008 levels.¹³⁹ Within the European Union, cultural spending remains modest at an average of 0.5% of GDP, and has not increased since 2014. At the European Union level, the Creative Europe programme has faced proposed reductions of around €27 million in EU budget allocations,¹⁴⁰ and during the last year, drastic cuts to national cultural funding have been announced in France¹⁴¹, the United Kingdom¹⁴² and Finland¹⁴³. Increased defence and security spending in Estonia¹⁴⁴ has led to tighter fiscal space for cultural and civil society funding, with cuts of €26.5 million euros by 2027.¹⁴⁵ Regional and city-level cuts or “redistributions” of funding to other social priority areas have accompanied this trend, as have cultural sector efficiency reforms. In many countries, the risk to artistic freedom and democracy has been a core narrative of cultural sector advocacy efforts to protest these cuts, making an explicit connection between SEA and the values and social infrastructure that counter the rise of conflict and instability.

This reduction in cultural spending works against the policy trend that is increasingly recognising participatory and community-based arts activity as crucial to sustainable development across multiple key priorities.

This reflects an entrenched and siloed logic that perceives cultural spending as an investment in leisure (i.e. a dispensable budget area in times of hardship), rather than as a contributor to social, environmental and economic prosperity. SEA practice is, at best, indirectly acknowledged within this logic, and the cultural funding opportunities that do exist give priority to more traditional cultural provision.

SILOED FUNDING LOGICS AND INSTRUMENTALISATION

This tension between SEA and institutional funding regimes is well documented, particularly in relation to the instrumentalisation of the arts within social policy frameworks.¹⁴⁶ SEA are not formally codified through institutional categories or statistical systems; instead, they are recognised indirectly through funding schemes that prioritise social and cultural outcomes rather than SEA as a distinct field. Each funding stream effectively constructs a temporary definition of SEA by setting eligibility criteria, thematic priorities, and expected impacts.

As a result, SEA operate across multiple policy domains without being fully anchored in any. The same practices may be framed

¹³⁷ UNESCO. (2022). *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity – Addressing culture as a global public good*. UNESCO.

¹³⁸ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an international organisation of mostly high-income countries that develops economic policy and collects data to promote growth, stability, and well-being across member states.

¹³⁹ OECD. (2022). *The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries, Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED)*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/991bb520-en>

¹⁴⁰ Culture Action Europe. (2025). Culture Action Europe calls for reversal of 27 million EUR proposed cuts from the 2026 Creative Europe budget. Culture Action Europe. October 2025. <https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/culture-action-europe-calls-for-reversal-of-27-million-eur-proposed-cuts-from-the-2026-creative-europe-budget>.

¹⁴¹ €150 million cut from the Ministry of Culture budget and cuts of up to 70% in regional arts funding: <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2025/02/10/french-culture-budget-cuts-spark-a-stern-response-from-the-academie-des-beaux-arts>.

¹⁴² Planned cuts in the 2025 Spending Review project a reduction of one third per citizen on Culture, Media & Sport in real terms by 2029, compared with 2010: <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/news/what-did-the-2025-spending-review-mean-for-the-arts>.

¹⁴³ Ministry of Finance, Finland. (2023). *General Government Fiscal Plan 2024–2027*. Helsinki: Ministry of Finance. <https://vm.fi/en/general-government-fiscal-plan>

¹⁴⁴ Republic of Estonia Government. (2025). Government approved the 2026 state budget. Republic of Estonia Government. September 2025. <https://www.valitsus.ee/en/news/government-approved-2026-state-budget>.

¹⁴⁵ Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture. (2024). The culture budget for 2025 will help ensure the fulfillment of essential responsibilities in the cultural sector during a challenging period of austerity. Republic of Estonia Ministry of Culture. September 2024. <https://www.kul.ee/en/news/culture-budget-2025-will-help-ensure-fulfillment-essential-responsibilities-cultural-sector>.

¹⁴⁶ Belfiore, E. (2002). Art as a means of alleviating social exclusion: Does it really work? A critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8(1), 91-106.

as cultural production, social intervention, or public health activity depending on the funding context. While this flexibility enables cross-sectoral work, it also places SEA organisations in a structurally marginal position between cultural and social funding systems. They are often neither prioritised within arts funding nor fully integrated into social service provision.

This gap necessitates continuous adaptation. In the absence of dedicated funding structures, SEA organisations must align their identities, language, and outputs with shifting funding priorities. This dynamic increases their vulnerability to instrumentalisation, as they are required to demonstrate value through predefined, measurable policy outcomes. Influenced by New Public Management¹⁴⁷ approaches, these frameworks privilege standardised indicators of impact, reinforcing a utilitarian understanding of cultural value.¹⁴⁸

Consequently, SEA organisations risk being assessed primarily against narrow policy metrics rather than the complex social and aesthetic outcomes they inherently generate.¹⁴⁹ In adapting to these conditions, there is an ongoing risk that both artistic and social value are diminished, as SEA practices are reshaped and evaluated as policy implementation tools rather than as an independent field with its own well-documented impact and value.¹⁵⁰

MONITORING SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

There is no national or international body or observatory dedicated to SEA monitoring and data collection, and terminology remains fragmented. Participation remains central to SEA's policy framing, though its definition is

ambiguous.¹⁵¹ Comparative research shows that participation can range from passive attendance to active involvement and co-decision-making, and contemporary European cultural policy increasingly privileges the latter, valuing co-creative engagement over consumption. However, this is not reflected in the statistical monitoring of cultural participation at the European level. Eurostat tracks cultural participation via attendance at events, visits to institutions, or personal hobbies such as playing a musical instrument, but these metrics fail to capture the relational, participatory, and co-creative dynamics that define SEA practices and the range of impacts that they have.¹⁵² As a result, SEA remain without the European-level evidence base that other creative and cultural sectors have, leaving them conceptually opaque for policymakers and funders alike.

POTENTIAL BRIDGING SOLUTIONS

There is a clear need to ensure that fragmentation and ambiguous definitions of cultural participation in policymaking are overcome by advocating for a clear and shared definition of SEA that can inform existing and future policy coherence.

Beyond this, there is also a need for mechanisms that can design pathways from policy to implementation that genuinely enable SEA organisations and the wider field to flourish, from the grassroots up, to bridge the policy-action gap that exists. While there are no hard and fast solutions to this, the most promising policymaking and grantmaking approaches are designed around SEA-specific needs, and/or embody the spirit of SEA practices themselves.

¹⁴⁷ A set of public sector reforms originating in the 1980s that introduced private-sector management principles — such as performance measurement, targets, and efficiency logics — into public services, significantly shaping how arts and cultural organisations are funded and evaluated. See Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3-19.

¹⁴⁸ Gray, C. (2008). Instrumental policies: Causes, consequences, museums and galleries. *Cultural Trends*, 17(4), 209-222.

¹⁴⁹ O'Neill, P. and Blamey, D. (2010). *Curating and the Educational Turn*. Open Editions.

¹⁵⁰ The complex social impact that SEA organisations enable is covered extensively under Impact and Influence. This is further explored in the context of evaluation under Evaluating Impact.

¹⁵¹ Négrier, E., & Dupin-Meynard, F. (2020). *Cultural policies in Europe: A participatory turn?*. Éditions de l'Attribut.

¹⁵² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Culture_statistics_-_cultural_participation

1

Co-Creative Policymaking

A growing trend involves the co-design of cultural strategies and plans with citizens through methodologies like citizens' assemblies. A notable example is the Citizens for Culture project in the West of England: the UK's first citizens' assembly dedicated to the creation of a regional Cultural Plan that reflects the creative vision of local communities and addresses inequities of access and inclusion in the cultural sector.

Funded iteratively by the Calouste Gulbenkian, Paul Hamlyn and Esmée Fairbairn Foundations, the assembly concept was co-designed between 2022 and 2024 with over 100 cultural and creative organisations and in partnership with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). In 2025, 52 citizens were selected from 15,000 households across the West of England to participate in the assembly and were invited to deliberate on the question: "What would culture and creativity look like in the West of England if they were for everyone?" They engaged in multiple learning and information sessions, met with creative practitioners, and developed recommendations for a Cultural Plan that will guide regional cultural priorities. On 15 January 2026, citizens presented their Cultural Plan to the Mayor of the West of England, alongside representatives from Arts Council England, funders and creative leaders. Citizens are now shaping the implementation stage via the co-design of a Citizens for Culture Panel, which will be set up to help guide the early delivery of the Plan, test ideas and learn from what works.

The Citizens for Culture Panel does not replace existing decision-making structures. Instead, it will work alongside the region's wider cultural and creative sector, helping to focus learning, collaboration and action around the priorities and actions in the Cultural Plan. What we learn from this example is the collective intelligence inherent in opening up planning processes to the communities fundamentally destined to benefit from cultural policies. It builds responsiveness to context, investment in workable outcomes, accountability and injects direct insight into existing public institutions to support planning that aligns with community needs.

Inspired by this success, Arts Council England, supported by the DCMS, has invested £2.225 million to scale similar initiatives through the "Citizens' Voices for Culture" project, which aims to deliver similar hyper-local engagement with citizens nationwide to ensure that decisions about funding are deeply informed by their voices.¹⁵³ This is a trend on the rise, with a proven track record for the power of connecting policymakers and citizens directly in the policymaking process, as well as the mediating role of SEA organisations in using their community-informed expertise to facilitate the process.

2

Trust-based Grantmaking: From Compliance to Collaboration

A growing trend in philanthropy — often termed participatory or trust-based grantmaking and supported by initiatives such as the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project¹⁵⁴ — emphasises collaboration between funders and grantees in response to complex social challenges that cannot be addressed through top-down design alone. In these models, funders and grantees act as co-learners, with organisations

¹⁵³ Goodwin, Emily. (2026, March 26). DCMS and ACE respond to Hodge review. Arts Professional. <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/dcms-and-ace-respond-to-hodge-review>

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org>

contributing to strategy, decision-making, and evaluation.¹⁵⁵ Funding processes are iteratively tested and refined, and funders often support grantees non-financially through capacity-building and non-financial support, such as mentoring or peer-to-peer learning opportunities. The approach reflects a shift from transactional funding towards ecosystem-based approaches that involve the strategic redistribution of power, where impact is understood as emerging from collective knowledge, relationships, and experimentation rather than predefined outputs.¹⁵⁶

Such approaches are particularly relevant to SEA, where outcomes are often emergent and relational. For example, the Pathfinders strand of Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Emerging Futures programme (2023–2024) supported a cohort of organisations working with communities to imagine alternative futures as an interconnected ecosystem through rapidly-delivered, flexible core funding, minimal reporting, and complementary structures for peer learning and reflective evaluation.¹⁵⁷

3

Peer-governed Grantmaking

Some models take the trust-based principle further, redistributing the power to decide how resources are divided to grantees themselves. Examples like Arts Collaboratory (The Netherlands and Global),¹⁵⁸ a translocal network supporting independent visual arts SEA organisations, has evolved into a peer-governed ecosystem in which members collectively shape strategy, governance, and decide funding allocation via annual Assemblies and smaller implementation groups. In the case of SÍN Arts Centre's GAP Participatory Funding in Hungary, artists applying to the fund review all proposals and collectively decide how to distribute the available funds,¹⁵⁹ valuing the artistic expertise of applicants in resource distribution.

These structures are founded on trust, mutual respect, peer learning, and relational accountability over top-down reporting, enabling funding decisions to reflect collectively deliberated needs and benefit from the lived experience of grantees.

4

Diversifying Grants

SEA organisations report that the majority of grant funding available to them is project-based, but this is not conducive to the various needs and phases of developing SEA organisations and delivering SEA work. Throughout the research, we have encountered a diversity of grant types that better correspond to SEA organisational needs. Below are examples that have responded to the challenges and needs SEA organisations reported.

A critical enabler of SEA activity is the time invested in developing relationships with communities and doing early-stage work project ideation necessary to begin applying for funds and longer-term structural support. As we saw in the case study of the [New Patron's project](#), seed funding from Fondation de France to support early-stage development for mediators and communities to develop project briefs was transformative in enabling many of the 500+ successful commissions.

¹⁵⁵ Carlson, C. et al. (2024, May 6). Embracing an Ecosystem Approach for Philanthropy. FSG: Reimagining Social Change. <https://www.fsg.org/blog/embracing-an-ecosystem-approach>

¹⁵⁶ Carlson, C. et al (2024).

¹⁵⁷ Kelkar, U. (2025, May 12). Pathfinders: learnings from 2 years of supporting future-building practice. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/imagination-infrastructure/pathfinders-learnings-from-2-years-of-supporting-future-building>.

¹⁵⁸ Arts Collaboratory. (n.d.). About Arts Collaboratory. <https://artscollaboratory.org/history>.

¹⁵⁹ Sin Arts Centre. (n.d.) The Gap Participatory Funding Programme. <https://en.sinarts.org/gap-participative-funding>

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, explored earlier, focused on providing rapid, core funding with minimal reporting to enable the conditions to support longer-term systemic change.

FundAction, a pan-European activist-led participatory grantmaking fund, shifts power over funding decisions from traditional grantmakers to grassroots movements and activists working for deep social transformation across Europe. They offer several distinct grant types that support different forms of work: Resist grants for rapid response to urgent needs, Rethink grants for collaboration and community building, and Renew grants for projects aimed at systemic change.

The PARTIS & Art for Change fund, offered by the Calouste Gulbenkian and “la Caixa” Foundations, includes a two-stage funding call for SEA projects: a one-year grant for R&D and ideation work, followed by a two-year delivery grant, recognising the crucial early-stage investment in development with the community that benefits from the time and resource to be truly participatory. The programme also includes capacity building opportunities for the funded SEA organisations, as well as a peer-to-peer community of practice supporting exchange and learning for all grantees.

It is crucial that funding landscapes cater to these different organisational and systemic needs, so that the cycle of project-based funding is divided into stages better aligned with SEA processes, the need to evaluate complex outcomes, and the potential for creating systemic change.

Summary of Learning

Co-creative policymaking is a relatively new practice that builds on well-established methodologies. While it may represent a significant shift in culture and power dynamics for policymakers to open up their domain of expertise to collective processes of inquiry and decision-making, when it relates to the distribution of limited public funds against a landscape of increasingly urgent and complex needs, collective intelligence is proving to deliver results that amplify the potential and impact of policymaking intentions, and enable implementation through a direct connection to citizens’ lived experience.

The power of direct connection is also evidenced in our examples of participatory grantmaking. This is more than a funding mechanism — it is a cultural and organisational practice that cultivates resilience, relational infrastructure, and collective agency. By transferring authority, building trust, and enabling experimentation, funders support both financial sustainability and organisational resilience. These models enable more contextually-informed decisions and create networks of solidarity. Importantly, trust-based process and power redistribution can reshape transactional funding cultures into collaborative, reflective and long-term relationships capable of systemic change.

Setting up participatory grantmaking in arts contexts requires careful design and resourcing. Key considerations include who participates and how they are compensated, what level of decision-making power is genuinely shared, and how transparency and accountability are maintained. Successful programmes typically invest in facilitation, training, and clear criteria co-developed with participants. Hybrid models—such as those combining community panels with funder oversight—can balance inclusivity with fiduciary responsibility, particularly in early stages. Crucially, participation must be meaningful rather than symbolic: without real influence over outcomes, processes risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

TRENDS AND FUTURES

VISION



We envision a vibrant and inclusive society where creativity flourishes, diversity is embraced, and equality is championed; where cultural activities serve as the cornerstone of personal and societal growth.

Survey respondent, UK

SEA organisations form and make work in the context of wider social change, challenge and transition. As such, they are heavily influenced by current socio-political, environmental and systemic challenges, and shape alternative visions of the future in response to them.

The diversity of the SEA field births a pluralistic vision of the future: one that is rooted in the particular needs of places and communities; that is equitable, inclusive, diverse and both socially and ecologically just; where people's rights and freedoms are honoured, and communities have the power and agency to determine their own socio-cultural agendas. They see a future in which systems have been successfully changed: power is distributed, and decision-making is rooted in lived experience, grounded in evidence and built from the grassroots up.

These futures are also expressed as the fruit of SEA practices: the future possibilities imagined by participants and communities in SEA experiences, made real through creative participation and collective agency. As such, the belief that creativity should be accessible to all is central, with SEA serving as a foundation for personal growth and collective empowerment.

Aside from imagining futures in which organisations are achieving financial stability, coherent policy recognition and increased visibility for their work, SEA organisations imagine blended organisations that reflect the cross-sector nature of SEA

work where arts and social practitioners work side by side. They envision SEA organisations integrating more deeply with public services, while building mainstream understanding about the ways in which creativity and engagement in artistic processes support social wellbeing.

TRENDS: EUROPE IN TRANSITION

To explore the future of the SEA field, we first have to understand the forces that are shaping it now.

Polycrisis

The Council of Europe stands at a moment of profound transformation. Across economic, political, social, and environmental domains, the European continent and the wider group of member states face intersecting pressures reshaping its economic model, social contracts, and governance systems. While Europe relatively remains prosperous, structural challenges persist: productivity gaps, demographic shifts, gentrification and housing crises in urban centres, and the need for large-scale investment in green and digital transitions threaten long-term competitiveness.¹⁶⁰

Politically and socially, democratic institutions remain strong in many countries, yet rising polarisation, public distrust, conflict and debates over migration, security, identity, and fairness are reshaping policy landscapes. Geopolitical challenges, war and conflict are having both a material and psychological impact. Technological change, digitalisation, and global economic restructuring are altering work and deepening inequalities, raising questions about social cohesion in a rapidly changing context.¹⁶¹

Environmental pressures compound these challenges. Europe is the fastest-warming continent, and climate impacts — from

¹⁶⁰ European Commission. (2024). 2025 Euro Area Report. Publications Office of the European Union,

¹⁶¹ Oprean-Stan, C. (2023). The Impact of Digitalisation and Sustainability on Inclusiveness: Inclusive Growth Determinants. Economic Computation and Economic Cybernetics Studies and Research, 57(4), 209-224.

extreme weather to biodiversity loss — already threaten ecosystems, infrastructure, and public health. Over 80% of protected habitats are in poor condition, with environmental degradation increasingly affecting economic stability and quality of life.¹⁶²

Rather than isolated shocks, Europe is experiencing a **polycrisis**: interconnected economic, social, political, and environmental pressures whose interactions amplify impact.¹⁶³ These dynamics reflect a broader **socio-technical transition**, in which established systems lose alignment with evolving societal and ecological realities, while innovations and new approaches emerge.¹⁶⁴ It is precisely in the midst of the polycrisis that SEA organisations are bringing their ability to hold complexity, instil creativity and navigate change with communities on multiple levels, but they also remain vulnerable to its shocks and instabilities, both as individual people and as organisations seeking to build consistent and sustainable models for community-led change. Financial precarity, the mental distress of living through and/or witnessing war, environmental destruction, biodiversity loss, hate crimes, and political instability, and the suffering of communities lacking resources or effective public services, is taking its toll on SEA organisations and practitioners whose reservoirs of hope and optimism are working overtime to sustain their visions for change, and who regularly experience burnout as they try to sustain relationships with communities between funding cycles, deliver complex social projects with limited funding, and compensate for systemic gaps in public service provision.

Changes in Social Infrastructure

In the context of the polycrisis, Europe's social infrastructure—the networks, places, and practices that enable connection, trust, and civic engagement—is under increasing strain. Demographic shifts,¹⁶⁵ urbanisation, economic precarity, digital mediation,¹⁶⁶ and political polarisation¹⁶⁷ all erode traditional social bonds and the “social glue” that binds communities. Rising mental health challenges and widespread loneliness further weaken the relational fabric that supports inclusive communities.¹⁶⁸ Environmental concerns, particularly climate anxiety, add another layer of collective stress.¹⁶⁹

The growth of SEA influence (see [A Growing Field](#)) is happening in the context of a wider shift towards participatory forms of deliberative democracy. There is growing evidence of an expansion in citizen-led and participatory democratic processes, particularly at the local and regional level. Studies by the OECD show a significant increase in deliberative democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting since the 1980s, with local governments often serving as key sites for experimentation.¹⁷⁰ Similarly, the Council of Europe notes that participatory and deliberative democratic practices have been adopted in a growing number of countries worldwide, reflecting broader efforts to strengthen citizen engagement in governance (Council of Europe, 2023). This trend signals that as interconnected, complex “glocal” challenges become more acute, collective forms of intelligence, deliberation and decision-making are

¹⁶² European Environment Agency. (2025). Europe's environment and climate: knowledge for resilience, prosperity and sustainability.

¹⁶³ Tooze, A. (2022, October 28). Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33>.

¹⁶⁴ Geels, F. W., & Schot, J. (2007). Typology of sociotechnical transition pathways. *Research Policy*, 36(3), 399–417.

¹⁶⁵ Eurostat. (2023). Population Structure and Ageing in Europe. Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing.

¹⁶⁶ Hampton, K. N., Sessions, L. F., & Ja Her, E. (2011). Core Networks, Social Isolation, and New Media: Internet and Mobile Phone Use, Network Size, and Diversity. *Information, Communication and Society*, 14(1), 130–155.

¹⁶⁷ Reiljan, A. (2021). Affective polarization in multiparty systems: conceptualization, measurement and foundations. European University Institute.

¹⁶⁸ Dubois, H., & Nivakoski, S. (2025). Mental health: Risk groups, trends, services and policies. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions; European Commission Joint Research Centre. (2022). Loneliness prevalence in the EU.

¹⁶⁹ Eurobarometer. (2024). Attitudes of Europeans towards the environment. European Commission.

¹⁷⁰ OECD. (2020). Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave. OECD.

considered fundamental to effective local governance and response.

Paradigm Shift

Systems are underpinned by values, beliefs, experiences and shared rituals – the culture that determines how we think and act. As the polycrisis tests the validity of the values that hold current systems in place, it is provoking the necessity for a paradigm shift. For the past several decades, the dominant social, economic, and political order has been shaped by post-war frameworks that gradually transitioned into neoliberal policies: market liberalisation, prioritisation of economic growth, and an extractive approach to resources. This paradigm has delivered material prosperity for some, but it has also entrenched structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation, contributing to climate change, precarity, and the erosion of public goods. In this environment, European cultural policy has increasingly adopted economic and market-oriented rationales, framing the cultural and creative sectors in terms of competitiveness, growth and integration into the creative economy, which has shifted attention away from intrinsic and social values toward instrumental economic contributions.¹⁷¹ This is compounded by declining public funds for culture globally.¹⁷²

In contrast, many SEA practices operate from a different set of values: one that seeks to reimagine society around principles of social justice, relational wellbeing, and meeting people's basic needs within planetary boundaries. SEA work embodies an alternative paradigm in action, creating spaces where communities can explore new forms of economic, cultural, and civic life, fostering participatory models that challenge extractive systems and emphasise collective flourishing over individual accumulation. In doing so, socially engaged arts not only respond to the pressures of the present but also signal the contours of a more just and sustainable societal future.

FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE FIELD

Building on the trajectories that these trends are paving, as well as the responses of SEA organisations to our questions about what they envisioned for their work and the field, we have woven together five future scenarios. They are composed by mapping the thematic connections from a diversity of visions and cross-referencing them against the trends above.

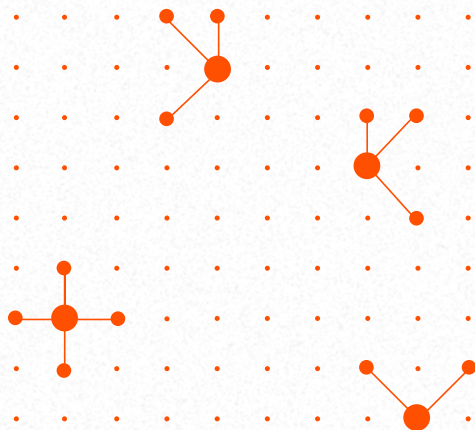
Each scenario describes a future that we already see emerging in the field, and it's important to acknowledge that these are not isolated trajectories — they are in fact interconnected and likely to all evolve simultaneously, one perhaps more strongly than the other depending on the conditions in which SEA organisations continue to operate, the decisions that SEA organisations and other actors in the field take, and the strategy behind intentional field-building initiatives.

¹⁷¹ Braniște, M. (2021). The Creativity Turn in European Cultural Policies: Structural Changes in the Sector. *Studia Ubb Sociologia*, 66(1), 51-73.

¹⁷² Unesco. (2026).

SCENARIO 1:

SEA Organisations as Civic Infrastructure



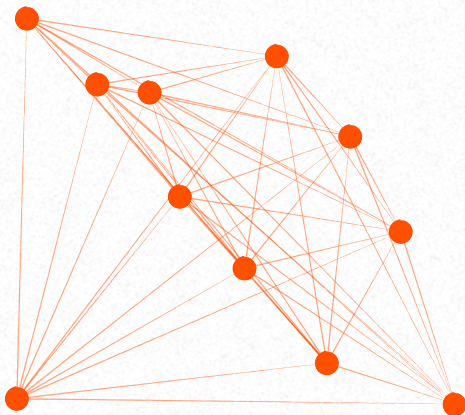
In the context of a democratic crisis and an urgent need to rebuild trust and based on the evidence that arts improve social cohesion, civic participation and wellbeing, governments and cities formally integrate SEA organisations and practitioners into urban planning, public health and civic participation policies and strategies. They act as facilitators of dialogue and collective decision-making processes; mediators between communities, policymakers and artists; and civic designers, leveraging the power of co-creative practices to directly involve communities in reshaping public life.

SEA organisations become recognised public functions alongside education, social work and health services, with stable funding provided for in public budgets and cross-sector funding from non-cultural sources. They have standardised roles and methodologies, established as part of professionalising the field and integrating it into public institutions. Rather than adapting to existing institutional norms, SEA organisations are introducing ways of organising and methods that evolve institutional understandings and logic, supporting institutional transition towards adaptability, innovation and agility.

Opportunities: In this future, SEA practices are systematically scaled up, visible and ubiquitous throughout public life. They are able to make a deep structural impact over time, and new career pathways for SEA practitioners and new entrants to the field are established.

Risks: The SEA field potentially becomes overburdened by bureaucracy, taking time and resources away from the artistic process. There is a risk that the artistic process is instrumentalised to achieve pre-determined goals rather than responding to emerging community-led needs, diluting the cultural meaning and transformational impacts of the artistic aspect of the work. When combined with conservative or far-right governments, SEA organisations risk losing their critical independence and ability to provide alternative political perspectives.

SCENARIO 2: Care and Repair Ecosystem



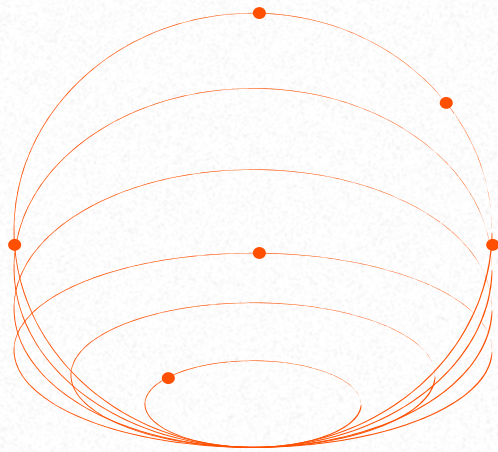
The loneliness epidemic, mental health crisis and increasing displacement have led to a breakdown in the social fabric, which intensifies the demand on public health services, already significantly under pressure with budget cuts. Policymaking begins to prioritise mental health, belonging and community resilience as core social needs to respond to mounting crises, and the significant evidence on the impact of SEA organisations in healthcare and wellbeing leads to SEA organisations being integrated in healthcare, social services and post-conflict recovery, both as sources of preventative social care and repair, and in acute settings to support recovery alongside specialist service providers.

SEA organisations are operating as trauma-informed facilitators holding safe spaces for vulnerable people to rebuild resilience and wellbeing, facilitating co-creative processes that support empowerment, and providing platforms for people to express themselves and feel heard. Hybrid organisations emerge in which SEA practitioners and professionals from other impact-specific domains work side-by-side, equipped with the skills to both provide direct care as well as attending to invisible needs such as self-expression, agency, imagination, and relational wellbeing, guided by coherent ethical and policy frameworks.

Opportunities: SEA organisations gain recognition, social relevance, and are able to achieve deep relational impacts towards the realisation of a care-based economy. They achieve better financial and structural stability, build on substantial evidence and existing academic and research pathways to continue building evidence and scaling up best practices.

Risks: Practitioners are at risk of emotional burnout, especially when they are not provided with the necessary training and/or psycho-social support, as in the case of other front-line social workers and healthcare professionals. There is a constant risk of professional boundaries being blurred, given the hybrid nature of SEA practices, and the artistic nature of the work is at risk of devaluation in the face of urgent social needs.

SCENARIO 3: Grassroots Commons



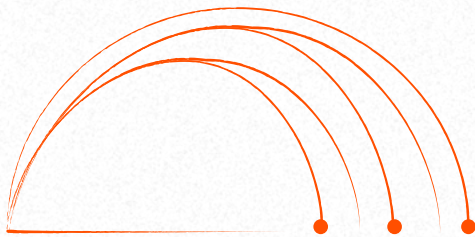
Driven by a deep-rooted distrust in institutions, rising inequality and austerity, institutional failure to take appropriate action on social and environmental crises, and growing decolonisation movements, communities “take matters into their own hands” and begin to create self-organised cultural and social systems to replace lacking structural support. These look different depending on the context, but models like mutual aid networks, cooperative cultural spaces and local commons are actively in use. SEA organisations have become a tool for self-organisation, collective governance, cross-collaboration and building community identity and relationships.

Business models are based on resource shaping, place-based approaches and co-ownership. A core group of funders across Europe are embracing the values of this approach and working horizontally with SEA organisations and community actors through trust-based, collaborative models of funding distribution.

Opportunities: Communities experience high levels of agency and shared ownership, empowering people to be active in co-creating cultural and social life. Radical experimentation is encouraged, and new economic models for SEA organisations and communities emerge, driven by collective values and the willingness of funders to shift approach and redistribute power.

Risks: The field remains fragile and inconsistently funded, increasingly so as it distances itself from government and public institutions. Burnout is a risk as local organising rests on volunteers, and both access and quality depend on local conditions and dynamics rather than standardised methodologies and collaborations with expert social welfare providers.

SCENARIO 4: Climate Resilience



As the climate and ecological crisis accelerates and more people are displaced, migration increases, and social, economic and health inequalities worsen. More frequent natural disasters put communities and public services under significant strain, exacerbating austerity measures and the redirection of public funds into disaster recovery and infrastructural transition. Communities are in a constant state of adaptation as they simultaneously seek to develop economic stability, integrate newcomers, and cope with environmental effects.

SEA organisations increasingly look to eco-social practice as a mission, and they become practices of resilience, adaptation, inter-species co-existence and collective survival. SEA organisations are involved in disaster recovery, climate adaptation planning, ecological restoration, grief work and collective processing. Their work is based on local knowledge, building cultural resilience to constant change, and empowering communities to imagine and take action towards realising plural alternative futures.

Opportunities: SEA organisations take on an essential social and visionary role in responding to the defining and intersectional planetary challenge of this age, developing new forms of knowledge and relationships to human and non-human life, as well as becoming integrated in the wider ecosystem of organisations and institutions shaping environmental action. They are recognised for the role they have in creating opportunities to develop and demonstrate new ways of being, doing and relating, as well as co-developing and testing technologies and reimagining public infrastructure and services.

Risks: Crisis fatigue can set in and squeeze out space for experimentation and expression if they are not directly attached to specific crises. As climate impacts escalate, they will affect communities and places at a scale beyond what individual SEA organisations can address. Without deepening collaboration across sectors and systemic actors, SEA organisations risk becoming too vulnerable to sustain a role in this scenario.

Scenario 5:

Permanent Adaptation



This is a future in which SEA operate in a context of continuous instability rather than responding to isolated crises. As the polycrisis unfolds, disruption becomes the norm rather than the exception. Stability is no longer the baseline, adaptation is, and traditional institutions struggle to keep pace with the speed and complexity of change. SEA organisations' capacity to hold complexity and emergent processes, build trust and facilitate agency becomes fundamental to community agency and the need to self-organise as public institutions struggle to keep pace with rapid changes.

SEA organisations increasingly move away from pre-planned, project-based activity to an ongoing, responsive practice embedded in communities. They nurture relationships, networks, and spaces that can be activated as crisis-response infrastructure, and their role expands to include coordinating local responses and helping people interpret events, process uncertainty, and navigate complex realities together. Projects evolve iteratively in response to ongoing change and need, rather than pre-defined goals and metrics. Cultural spaces increasingly act as community hubs, spaces of care and safe refuge, and points of reference for local knowledge sharing.

Opportunities: SEA organisations have relationships with communities that can be mobilised quickly, and their relevance and necessity embed them as core to community life. They have the ability to operate in spaces and relationships that institutions cannot, and SEA practices are constantly evolving and innovating in response to changing conditions.

Risks: SEA work is always “on”, regardless of whether the funding is there or not. SEA organisations are increasingly vulnerable to burnout and instrumentalisation as they cover roles traditionally expected of public services without institutional recognition or adequate pay. Long-term reflection and planning become almost impossible.

EMERGING PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

Across these scenarios, we can observe patterns that indicate how the field is evolving and what could strengthen SEA organisations as we move ahead into these plural, potential futures.

- From making art to maintaining systems:** Across all scenarios, SEA are shifting from producing projects to sustaining long-term social, civic, and ecological infrastructures that hold communities together over time through iterative co-creation processes.
- From scale as growth to scale as depth and replication:** Instead of scaling by expansion, impact is achieved through deep local embedding and transferable models. SEA organisations are increasingly place-based and rooted long-term in communities.
- From participation to collective coordination:** Engagement is evolving into a deeper function of helping people, institutions, and sectors to organise, negotiate, and act together under conditions of complexity and uncertainty.
- From artists to system stewards:** Practitioners are no longer defined primarily as creators but as having hybrid roles as artist-facilitators, artist-researchers, mediators, caregivers, and coordinators of relational and institutional ecosystems.
- From cultural practice to cross-system infrastructure:** SEA are moving beyond the arts sector into distributed roles that embed art-based methods across health, governance, education, urban systems, conflict recovery and peacemaking, and environmental adaptation.
- From discrete outcomes to relational resilience:** Value is increasingly located in what is sustained rather than what is produced — trust, care, social cohesion, adaptive capacity, and collective agency.
- From stable projects to adaptive continuity:** In all futures, SEA operate under conditions of ongoing change, requiring practices that are embedded, flexible, and able to respond continuously to social and ecological instability.
- From human-centred to eco-centred:** Ecological pressures are expanding the field to acknowledge the interconnection between nonhuman, ecological, and planetary health to human wellbeing.

The patterns reveal a deeper reality: **the function of SEA organisations is increasingly moving beyond the production of cultural value to enabling social, civic and ecological systems to function and adapt in the face of deepening social divides and systemic crises.** In social systems largely governed by traditional institutions, SEA organisations are working on a relational, distributed and interconnected logic. They are paving the way for new systems that are better suited to tackling complexity. Accelerating this potential impact requires deeper, horizontal collaboration with existing institutions. In the absence of institutional willingness, SEA organisations will lean into their grassroots origins (as in Scenario 3). Their capacity to have a significant impact in these versions of the future will be dependent on their community interconnectedness and the willingness of private entities to support and collaborate with

them.

From this analysis, we can see that a core enabler of the vision set out by SEA organisations in this report is more horizontal collaboration with key policymaking and funding institutions. The wider ecosystem of actors that make up the SEA field needs to work together, using the same systemic logic, to navigate and build the capacity to rapidly respond to the change rippling through Europe.

LEARNING FROM HEALTHY SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS ECOSYSTEMS

Ideally, pathways for each of these scenarios to flourish without leaning too hard into the risks can be possible. Before mapping these out, we can look to existing healthy SEA ecosystems to observe traits that can help guide more systemic approaches to SEA field-building.

Based on the case study on Finland's national ecosystem of arts-based wellbeing presented on the following page, the fundamental elements are:

- 1 A policy environment where SEA interventions can be taken seriously and understood for what they are (in this case, a welfare model that treats wellbeing as a social right and cultural participation is framed as integral to a dignified life).
- 2 A mixed funding system for both practice and research, enabling innovation, long-term development and systemic change over time, unified around common goals.
- 3 Higher education institutions are researching SEA practice to better understand and support field-building, and designing courses specifically for SEA practice, enabling professionalisation and higher standards of practice.
- 4 National and international collaboration networks sharing knowledge, evidence, supporting practitioners and organisations, and engaging in ongoing advocacy in the context of changes in funding landscapes.

➤ CASE STUDY

ARTS AND HEALTH IN FINLAND – BUILDING A NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM FOR WELLBEING

Finland has emerged as one of Europe's most coherent centres for arts and health, driven by demographic pressure, a strong welfare ethos, cross-sector governance, and sustained investment in socially engaged arts.

With one of Europe's fastest-ageing populations, the country has had to rethink wellbeing across the life course. Municipalities and wellbeing service counties face growing demand for elderly care, dementia support, and prevention, positioning arts and culture not as enrichment but as essential social infrastructure. Within Finland's welfare model, cultural participation is treated as a social right and a component of dignified living, creating a policy environment where arts and health are recognised as a public good.

Historically, municipalities oversaw both cultural and social-health services, enabling experimentation across care homes, hospitals, and community settings. This structural proximity, combined with mixed funding (state, municipal, EU, foundations, and research), has supported both innovation and long-term development.

Higher education has been central to professionalising the field and strengthening its policy recognition. At Uniarts Helsinki, Kai Lehtikainen has mapped competencies for SEA practice and developed a postgraduate diploma in participatory, community and socially engaged arts. This trains artists to work ethically in health and social contexts in partnership with municipalities and NGOs.

Alongside this field-building work, the ArtsEqual (2015–2021) programme, led by Heidi Westerlund and co-led by Lehtikainen, reframed cultural participation as a public service and resulted in tangible policy changes. It showed that access to the arts improves wellbeing, reduces inequality, and should be embedded across the life course — helping shift arts and health from innovation to established public value.

The establishment of coordination and advocacy networks, Taikusydän and Kulttuurihyvinvointipooli, has provided a national backbone for developing and embedding SEA practice and policy initiatives in public services through advocacy, knowledge-sharing, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration. Internationally, Finland is also active in the Nordic Arts & Health Research Network and the CultureAndHealth Platform, contributing to European collaboration and policy development.

Finland illustrates a mature SEA ecosystem where arts and health are integrated into wellbeing, social inclusion, and preventative care — demonstrating how long-term policy alignment, research, and infrastructure can embed socially engaged arts within public systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE

Drawing together the insights from this research, we have identified key recommendations that can best address the needs of SEA organisations to thrive, and their potential to contribute in critical ways to the social transformation that is necessary to steer Europe through the polycrisis and towards plural futures that enable healthy, thriving local people and places.

There are overarching recommendations that we see all systemic actors addressed in this report — policymakers, funders, academics and organisations — as having a role in realising, and there are others that are more targeted to different actors to offer role-specific recommendations. We have organised cross-cutting recommendations under five key pillars: **Recognise, Resource, Embed, Measure** and **Connect**.

The recommendations are overall significantly geared towards funders and policymakers because they hold disproportionate power in enabling the conditions for the field to thrive and scale up its current impact transversally across multiple areas of social and environmental need.

CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognise

- 1 **Advocate for a clear and shared definition of SEA that can inform existing and future policy coherence.** Use the [definition](#) and [framework of common principles](#) in this report as a starting point.
- 2 **Name SEA explicitly in policies, funding programmes, research and advocacy.** Align fragmented terminologies by grouping participatory and community-led arts activity under the SEA umbrella, to standardise and create coherence across policies and frameworks relating to the SEA field, particularly to support monitoring.
- 3 **Recognise the transversal, cross-sectoral and systemic potential of SEA.** Position SEA as a cross-sector field, not just a cultural activity. Shape policies that acknowledge the specific ways SEA practices contribute to social change, valuing the transversal and systemic ways that creative expression and cultural rights enable multiple levels of personal and social transformation, alongside recognising SEA's value creation in specific areas of social impact. Use this report to inform narratives that can clearly communicate the specific value of arts-based social change beyond isolated social outcomes to transversal social impacts. See the [Advocacy Approaches](#) section for more detail.
- 4 **Recognise the hybrid roles SEA artists play (artist, mediator, facilitator) and strengthen the conditions for them to work safely and effectively,** including fair payment, adequate time to work with communities — especially vulnerable populations — social protection systems, access to professional development and a specific job category to enable the recognition of SEA artists in national monitoring and statistics.

Resource

- 5 Close the policy–action gap** by aligning policies that outline the potential of participatory, community-led artistic activity with implementation planning that can translate intentions into tangible opportunities for the field to expand its influence. This includes structured funding opportunities and embedded evaluation and monitoring appropriate to capturing the field’s value and impact. This is best done in partnership between policymakers, funders, SEA organisations, academics and experts in the field, to ensure strategic alignment through joint planning.
- 6 Diversify funding logic** to shift from short-term project funding to multi-year, trust-based funding that targets the various needs and stages of SEA development and community collaboration. Ensure that funding for early-stage research and development, project design, implementation, core funding, evaluation and capacity building is provided for across the funding ecosystem. Balance support across different ecosystem actors and roles, including organisations that can act as artistic facilitators for community-led co-creation, mediators, researchers and capacity-building providers for the field.
- 7 Provide capacity-building infrastructure.** Support the professionalisation of SEA organisations and practitioners, and the transference of SEA methodologies into the wider cultural sector, by understanding their needs and co-designing training in participatory methods, co-creation and evaluation of social impact. Support intermediaries (hubs, labs, platforms, networks) that independently monitor and advocate for the sustainability and quality of SEA practices, supporting individuals, organisations and communities to network, develop collaborations and projects, identify funding and resources, identify and access capacity building opportunities.

Embed

- 8 Embed SEA in social policy.** Integrate SEA transversally across all areas of social and environmental development (for example, into health, education, environment, youth, migration, and urban development strategies). Treat SEA and cultural participation as core social infrastructure, not as an additional or “nice-to-have” activity alongside frontline social services. Encourage collaboration between social services and SEA organisations to enhance public service delivery and innovation.
- 9 Collaborate with SEA organisations and communities through participatory governance structures to shape policy, funding programmes and criteria.** Treat organisations and communities as critical collaborators who channel collective intelligence. As climate change, migration and other global challenges affect places differently, lived experience is essential for identifying where policy and funding can have the greatest impact.

Measure

10

Redefine “cultural participation” from audiences consuming culture to participation as a spectrum of different ways of engaging with, shaping and co-creating culture.

Make sure this is reflected in the monitoring of cultural participation at all levels, so that the data and evidence based around SEA participation at scale can be built alongside standard cultural participation metrics.

11

Co-create context-specific evaluation frameworks and metrics with SEA organisations and communities, and prioritise understanding process-based impacts rather than final outputs.

Adapt frameworks to respond to local contexts and the lived experience of communities. Identify context-specific metrics in dialogue with community members and favour qualitative, iterative evaluation models that are embedded in the artistic process to measure complex social impact, rather than pre-determined, quantitative outcomes. Review learning iteratively to inform the evolution of grantmaking that can respond to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Connect

12

Network the field and encourage collaboration between SEA organisations and wider social and cultural sectors.

At present, the SEA ecosystems are informally connected and fragmented. There is a need for greater network weaving to give shape to the field and enable actors within it to develop through connection and solidarity. Connect across existing local and international networks to create more field-level exchange and coherence, and level the field between organisations, funders and policymakers to enable multi-stakeholder co-creative processes that can address policy-action gaps and create infrastructures that build on the strengths of SEA practices, rather than their ability to deliver specific and siloed social outcomes.

13

Create alliances with SEA academics and research institutes to build evaluation, research and knowledge creation partnerships, and stay informed on best practices and emerging theories. Work together to identify pathways and priorities for field-building research that can address some of the recommendations in this report, as well as local, national and international knowledge that can inform narratives to cement the social impact and understanding of SEA practice.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS

Local Level (Cities, Municipalities, Regions, Provinces)

- 1 **Recognise — embed SEA in local social policy and implementation.** Integrate SEA transversally across all areas of social and environmental development and encourage collaboration between social services and SEA organisations to enhance public service delivery and innovation.
- 2 **Resource — enable cross-sector funding pools.** Align budgets across culture and areas of social impact that SEA organisations contribute to, such as health, education, environment and social inclusion, to create more SEA-relevant and specific funding opportunities which encourage cross-sector collaboration and integration.
- 3 **Resource — address territorial inequalities.** Target funding for rural areas, peri-urban zones, and underserved communities to expand SEA reach out from urban centres and neighbourhoods into harder-to-reach places and communities.
- 4 **Embed — create local co-governance structures.** Establish permanent citizen and artist advisory bodies, using models like citizen assemblies, boards and advisory groups invested with decision-making power over strategy and resources, which engage communities in directly shaping policies and co-designing cultural programmes that affect them.
- 5 **Connect — build local SEA ecosystems.** Create networks between grassroots organisations, social services, academic and public institutions that can support the organic development of cross-sector collaborations, research partnerships and knowledge sharing across peer networks, and the scale-up of SEA across territories.

National Level (Governments)

- 6 **Resource — move from strategy to implementation.** Introduce clear targets, dedicated budgets and accountability mechanisms that translate strategic intentions and aims relating to the potential of SEA interventions into actionable objectives. Work with SEA organisations to shape implementation plans.
- 7 **Resource — create dedicated funding streams for SEA.** Recognise SEA as a distinct policy area that extends across multiple sectors. Create targeted funding opportunities that support community-based SEA work, interdisciplinary collaboration and long-term programmes that enable multi-year engagements to sustain and build on community relationships.
- 8 **Measure — expand how cultural participation is measured.** Move from considering SEA impact through an economic lens to include indicators for social cohesion, depth of participation, creative skills and learning, and wellbeing, ideally co-creating metric frameworks with SEA stakeholders. Ensure that the definition of cultural participation is expanded to include co-creation and citizen-led cultural engagement, and that this is monitored at the national level.

EU Level (European Union and Transnational Bodies)

- 9** **Recognise — embed and name SEA explicitly in EU cultural policy frameworks.** Move beyond “access to culture” to explicitly include co-creation, community-led culture and other forms of SEA participation.
- 10** **Recognise — strengthen cross-sector policy integration.** Align SEA with relevant policy areas like the Compass for Culture, Green Deal, social inclusion strategies, health and wellbeing policies.
- 11** **Recognise — build solidarity networks and safeguards to ensure SEA organisations can operate safely in contexts of political instability.** Support cross-border solidarity and advocacy to strengthen SEA recognition, reduce isolation, and protect practitioners from political pressures and social stigma.
- 12** **Resource — align funding programmes with social impact.** Adapt programmes (e.g. Creative Europe-type models) to explicitly support long-term SEA work, reducing administrative burden for grassroots actors.
- 13** **Measure — lead on cultural metrics innovation.** Develop EU-wide frameworks for measuring and monitoring cultural participation in all of its definitions, including capturing co-creation processes, and tracking the social impact of SEA work.
- 15** **Connect — support transnational SEA networks and capacity building.** Design funding for knowledge exchange and peer learning infrastructures, and support capacity building initiatives that enable SEA professionalisation, organisational development and ecosystemic resilience.

ADVOCACY APPROACHES

ADVOCATING FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS

This section draws together initial insights and advocacy approaches encountered in the research process. They are elaborated further in a separate “[Advocacy Toolkit](#)”, which accompanies this report. The toolkit includes practical resources to help practitioners, organisations, networks, funders and policymakers translate the report’s findings into advocacy at regional, national and EU levels, bringing together key messages, policy briefings, communications materials and stories of impact from across Europe.

Download the Advocacy Toolkit — visit www.allianceforsociallyengagedarts.org

Advocacy for SEA must combine direct experience, research and evidence, and grassroots mobilisation to influence understanding and leverage support at multiple levels.

Effective approaches could integrate three complementary strands:

Experiential advocacy – Engaging policymakers, funders, and public stakeholders directly in SEA processes allows them to experience participation, co-creation, and relational outcomes first-hand. For example, the International Teaching Artists Collaborative (ITAC) supports SEA practitioners around the world, influences agencies like UNESCO to consider the role of SEA in their frameworks and policies, and works with movements like the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) to directly embed SEA activities into their conferences and events. This gives technocrats and policymakers a direct experience of SEA, rather than attempting to explain how and what SEA do conceptually.

Research-led advocacy – Robust scholarship and evidence underpin credibility and legitimacy in public policy contexts. Finland’s Arts Council, for instance, integrates evaluation of SEA practices into funding and policy processes, generating data that demonstrates the field’s measurable contributions to education, health, and social cohesion. Evidence can also be linked to international frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Inner Development Goals (IDGs), or Doughnut Economics, highlighting how SEA practices cultivate competencies aligned with systemic social change.

Grassroots advocacy – Building collective voice from within the field remains critical. Local SEA networks, community arts collectives, and participatory forums help surface diverse practitioner perspectives, demonstrating broad-based support and illustrating the social relevance of SEA in multiple contexts. This bottom-up approach strengthens narratives around equity, community-led innovation, and participatory governance, complementing top-down policy engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The framework for SEA advocacy can be summarised through five interlinked pillars:

- 1 **Recognise:** Explicitly name and define socially engaged arts in policy, funding, and institutional frameworks. Recognition must go beyond Western European contexts, encompassing diverse practices across Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe.
- 2 **Resource:** Advocate for long-term, multi-annual funding to reflect the relational, process-oriented, and systemic nature of SEA. Short-term project grants cannot sustain the ongoing community engagement, co-creation, and capacity-building inherent to the field.
- 3 **Embed:** Integrate SEA practices into governance structures and cross-sector policy domains. This includes cultural policy as well as education, health and wellbeing, environmental initiatives, conflict resolution, and social inclusion frameworks.
- 4 **Measure:** Develop evaluation mechanisms that capture relational, long-term, and systemic impacts. Participatory evaluation, qualitative case studies, and cross-sector indicators can complement quantitative metrics, reflecting SEA's full societal contribution.
- 5 **Connect:** Network the field to build coherence, collective advocacy, peer-learning and opportunities to build resilience, solidarity and scale best practices.

NARRATIVE ENTRY POINTS

Key narratives, statistics, and case studies enable SEA advocates to articulate the field's value to external stakeholders:

- Field visibility and framing** – SEA are often overshadowed by assumptions of “high art” and siloed cultural categories. Highlighting the field's complex and transversal social impact demonstrates relevance beyond traditional cultural policy and positions arts-based methods as having a crucial role in social transformation and systemic change.
- Quantitative and qualitative evidence** – Include data from SEA surveys, impact reports, and Sustainable Development Goal mappings (e.g., SDG 3, 4, 8, 11, 13) to illustrate contributions to health, education, employment, and sustainability.
- Illustrative quotes and lived experience** – Testimonies from participants, communities, and practitioners humanise the field's social value, complementing statistical data.
- Alignment with global frameworks** – Demonstrate coherence with IDGs, UN SDGs, Doughnut Economics, or local policy priorities to strengthen advocacy positioning.

Strategic entry points for advocacy include:

-  Building shared understanding of SEA's social and transformative value across cultural, social, educational, and environmental policy spheres.
-  Highlighting the unique competencies cultivated by SEA practices, including collaboration, empathy, critical thinking, and systems awareness.
-  Promoting co-creation and participatory governance as central to social innovation, resilience, and democratic engagement.
-  Emphasising economic, social, and civic returns alongside artistic merit to appeal to diverse funding and policymaking bodies.

By leveraging these approaches, recommendations, and narrative entry points, SEA advocates can systematically advance recognition, embed practice in cross-sector frameworks, secure sustainable resources, and ensure robust measurement of social impact.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX I: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

While we have tried to keep this report as jargon-free as possible, building an understanding of the SEA field includes normalising the language specifically developed to describe it. Here we include a glossary of terms used throughout the report.

Civic infrastructure is the network of shared spaces, policies, programs, and social systems that enable community life, build trust, and support meaningful civic participation. It is the foundation that allows people to connect, deliberate, and shape decisions that affect their lives.

Co-creation practices refers to working *with* people rather than *for* them — a process where stakeholders, communities, and practitioners collaboratively shape ideas, decisions, and outcomes.

Combined arts refers to creative work that intentionally brings together two or more art forms—such as music, theatre, dance, visual art, or digital media—into a single, integrated piece. Rather than presenting each form separately, these elements are combined, so they interact and contribute equally to the overall experience, often alongside non-art disciplines like technology or community participation.

Commons refers to resources that are shared, collectively managed, and accessible to a defined community, not owned by the state or the market, but stewarded for mutual benefit - things like air, water, land, and other environmental assets that are accessible to all members of society.

Cultural democracy, the idea that people have the right not only to access culture but to create and shape it according to their own values and experiences.

Cultural democratisation, the extension of access to established cultural forms, without fundamentally questioning who defines cultural value.

Dialogic art is an artistic practice that centres on dialogue, interaction, and shared meaning-making between artists, participants, and audiences. It treats conversation itself as the medium of the work, emphasising exchange over objects.

Instrumentalisation is the act of using people, ideas, or practices as tools to advance someone else's goals, often manipulating or distorting their original purpose.

Levers for change are the key points in a system where a relatively small shift can produce a disproportionately large effect on how that system behaves over time.

Paradigm shift refers to a radical transformation in the underlying beliefs, frameworks, and practices that shape how a system understands and acts — replacing an old worldview with a new one.

Participatory arts refers to artistic practices that actively involve people in creating or performing the work, emphasising collaboration, interaction, and shared authorship between artists and participants.

Relational aesthetics refers to an art movement and theory in which human relationships, social interaction, and shared encounters are the primary material of the artwork. It was coined by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s and remains a foundational concept in socially

engaged and participatory arts.

Seed funding (also called seed capital or seed money) is the initial round of financing a startup receives to develop the idea, build early operations, and prove the concept, helping to move from idea to functioning business.

Social infrastructure refers to the framework of institutions and physical spaces that support shared civic life. Places like community centres, libraries and parks provide space for people to meet, engage, and build relationships and trust that underpin any successful community. It is also increasingly used to describe non-physical elements that produce the same social outcomes, such as participatory practices, grassroots initiatives, cultural and civic networks, and informal systems of care and mutual support that enable people to share resources, strengthen social cohesion, and respond collectively to challenges.

Systemic change means dealing with the root causes and underlying conditions of problems, not their symptoms. It refers to the long-term process of transforming the structures, relationships, and mindsets that shape a system, so that it produces more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Transdisciplinary refers to integrating academic disciplines with community, practitioner, and policy knowledge to co-create holistic solutions to complex societal challenges.

Wicked problems are seemingly impossible to solve because its complexity means that it has no determinable stopping point, and it is interconnected with other complex problems. Climate change, for example, is often referred to as a “super wicked” problem.

ANNEX II: TABLE OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS TERMINOLOGY

The following is a non-exhaustive list. Each language group potentially has many more terms and versions of SEA concepts. This mapping was simply a starting point to identify patterns that united the field across Europe linguistically or conceptually.

Table 4: Terminology related to Socially Engaged Arts across the Council of Europe area

Region	Language	Term (Local Language)	English Approximation	Notes / Context
British Isles	English	Community arts	Community-based arts	Longstanding practice emphasising participation and empowerment
	English	Participatory arts	Participation-based arts	Common in cultural policy and funding
	English	Social practice / socially engaged art	Socially engaged arts	Academic and contemporary art discourse
	English	Civic arts	Arts for civic engagement	Used in democratic participation contexts
France & Francophone Europe	French	médiation culturelle	Cultural mediation	Institutional term for connecting publics and art
	French	art participatif	Participatory art	Used in museums and community projects
	French	art en commun	Art in common	Proposed alternative term highlighting collective production
German-speaking Europe German		Kulturvermittlung	Cultural mediation / cultural facilitation	Broad term often related to educational contexts

	German	partizipative Kunst	Participatory art	Common praxis (and discourse) in contemporary art and culture
	German	soziokulturelle Arbeit	Socio-cultural work	Common in Germany and Austria in community cultural projects
Southern Europe	Italian	arte partecipativa	Participatory art	Used in research and cultural welfare initiatives
	Italian	attivismo	Activism	Describes artistic work that has activist goals
	Italian	arte pubblica partecipata	Participatory public art	Often used in urban regeneration
	Spanish	prácticas colaborativas	Collaborative practices	Common academic term in Spain
	Spanish	arte comunitario	Community art	Grassroots cultural projects
	Portuguese	arte comunitária	Community art	Used in community cultural programs
	Portuguese	arte participativa	Participatory arts	Used in community cultural programs and funding streams
Nordic Countries	Finnish	yhteisötaide	Community art	Widely used in Finnish SEA research
	Swedish	deltagarkultur / deltagarbase-rad konst	Participatory culture / participatory art	Used in cultural democracy discourse
	Danish	deltagerbaseret kunst	Participation-based art	Policy discussions on cultural participation
	Norwegian	kunst i offentlig rom / deltakerbasert kunst	Art in public space / participatory art	Used in public art programmes

Central & Eastern Europe	Polish	sztuka party-cypacyjna	Participatory art	Contemporary art discourse
	Polish	animacja kul-tury	Cultural anima-tion	Longstanding practice in com-munity culture
	Czech	komunitní umění	Community art	Used in socially oriented art projects
	Hungarian	közösségi művészet	Community art	Used in civic arts initiatives
	Romanian	arta participa-tivă	Participatory art	Used in socially engaged con-temporary art
Western Balkans	Serbian/Croa-tian/Bosnian	društveno angažovana umjetnost	Socially engaged art	Direct term used in regional calls
	Serbian/Croa-tian/Bosnian	participativna umjetnost	Participatory art	Used in contemporary art proj-ects
	Serbian/ Cro-atian/ Bos-nian	umjetnost u zajednici	Art in the com-munity	Community arts equivalent
	Albanian	arte komunitare	Community art	Used in grassroots initiatives
	Greek		Participatory art	Used in socially engaged prac-tice
Baltic States	Lithuanian	bendruomenės menas	Community art	Used in community cultural initiatives
	Latvian	kopienas māksla	Community art	Used in participatory projects
	Estonian	kogukonna-kunst	Community art	Community-based arts prac-tices

Caucasus	Georgian		Public/social art	Used for civic or socially oriented art
	Georgian	კლ-მეცნიერება	Co-creation	Used in collaborative arts projects
	Armenian		Community art	Used in local art initiatives
	Azerbaijani	<i>icma sənəti</i>	Community art	Used in cultural NGO projects

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