

Alliance for

Socially
Engaged
Arts

CONSTELLATIONS OF

C A N G
H N E

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS
ORGANISATIONS ACROSS EUROPE

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.



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