The Role of Arts and Sport in Community Development

Culture and participation in community life

Ingrid Jansen-Neeling

Public edition | November 2026

About this paper

Arts and sport can bring people together, support creative expression and provide opportunities to take part in community life. Their contribution depends on how activities are designed, who can participate and whose priorities shape decisions. This paper explores those questions through community development theory and a local example from Denmark, Western Australia.

Adapted from coursework completed for the Master of International and Community Development at Deakin University, this public edition draws on published literature and illustrative examples. It is a discussion paper, with no new interviews, surveys or evaluation of the initiatives described. Its central argument is that culture deserves serious attention in the design of community development work.

Culture in everyday life

Culture shapes how people understand the world, relate to one another and respond to change. It is expressed through beliefs, values, language, traditions and everyday activities. It also changes as people create, question and adapt shared ways of living (Clammer, 2014; Offord et al., 2015).

An artwork, a community festival or a sporting tradition can carry meanings that extend beyond the activity itself. These practices may connect people with local history, express identity or help knowledge pass between generations. Understanding their significance requires attention to the people involved and the circumstances in which participation takes place (MacGregor, 2011; Matarasso, 2023).

Development initiatives enter this existing cultural life. When a program overlooks local meanings, relationships or priorities, it may struggle to gain support or unintentionally weaken practices that people value. Working with culture means asking how people already organise community life, what they wish to sustain and what they would like to change (Clammer, 2014; Ife, 2016).

Opportunities to participate

Community development involves expanding people's opportunities to live lives they value. Sen's capability approach offers a useful starting point: the availability of an activity does not, by itself, tell us whether people have a meaningful opportunity to take part (Sen, 1999).

Cost, transport, timing, confidence and a sense of welcome can all influence participation. Cultural expectations and existing relationships may also shape whether someone feels that an activity is for them. A program can be open in principle while remaining difficult for some people to access.

Dialogue is therefore part of program design. Freire's work draws attention to the importance of people contributing their knowledge, questioning assumptions and participating in decisions that affect them (Freire, 1970). Community development approaches similarly emphasise local involvement and shared responsibility (Kenny & Connors, 2017).

The practical question is who helps decide what happens. Inviting residents to attend a finished program offers a different kind of participation from involving them in its purpose, design and review. Both may have value, but they should not be presented as equivalent.

What the arts can contribute

Creative activities can offer ways to express experiences that are difficult to put into ordinary conversation. They can also provide a shared task around which relationships develop. Making, performing or discussing work together gives people opportunities to encounter different perspectives and contribute something of their own.

The literature considered in the original paper connects arts engagement with wellbeing, attention and social connection (Christensen, 2024; Fancourt, 2026). The concept of flow describes deep engagement in an activity, with implications for motivation and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). These ideas help explain why creative participation may matter to individuals as well as communities.

Benefits should not be assumed for every activity or participant. The quality of the experience, the setting and opportunities for continued involvement all deserve attention. Repeated participation may allow relationships and confidence to develop in ways that a single event cannot, while a one off event may still offer a valuable introduction.

Cultural development also concerns what happens to creative practices themselves. Supporting local artists, sharing skills and creating opportunities to present work may help a community sustain and develop its cultural life. This is part of the argument for valuing culture within development, alongside the possible social benefits of participation (Clammer, 2014).

What sport can contribute

Sport can provide regular opportunities for physical activity, teamwork and social connection. Clubs and community programs may bring people into contact through shared interests and responsibilities. Their potential contribution extends beyond individual participation to the relationships formed around organising and supporting activities (Kidd, 2011).

That potential depends on design. Coalter (2010) cautions against assuming that sport automatically produces wider development outcomes. Programs can reflect external priorities, reward short term attendance or reproduce existing inequalities. Counting participants does not explain whether they felt included, had influence or wished to return.

Sport initiatives therefore need the same attention to context and power as arts programs. Questions include who can afford to join, how beginners are welcomed, whose interests receive resources and whether different groups have a voice. Connections with schools, health services and community organisations may help address barriers, provided responsibilities and expectations are clear.

Relationships within and between groups

Putnam's account of social capital highlights the importance of networks, trust and cooperation (Putnam, 2000). Arts and sport can create opportunities for these relationships to develop, but the kinds of connections formed matter.

Bonding social capital concerns close connections within a group. These can provide friendship, mutual support and a sense of belonging. Bridging social capital concerns relationships across different groups. These may create opportunities to encounter unfamiliar perspectives and broaden community connections.

A well established group can be supportive for members while appearing difficult for newcomers to enter. Program planning should therefore consider both the strength of existing relationships and the opportunities for new people to join. Familiarity within a group is not, by itself, evidence of wider inclusion.

Respecting culture while examining exclusion

Local culture is not uniform. Communities contain differences in experience, values and influence. A practice that is meaningful to some people may be uncomfortable or inaccessible to others. Local traditions can also reflect inequalities involving gender, age or social position (Ife, 2016; Wilson, 2015).

Respect for culture needs to sit alongside careful consideration of whose views are being heard. Practitioners need to ask who speaks for a community, who is absent from discussions and whether people can disagree without losing their place in the group.

This creates a continuing responsibility to listen and review. Drawing on local knowledge can strengthen a program's relevance, while critical reflection can help identify exclusion that has become familiar or taken for granted. Community involvement is strongest when it allows people to question arrangements as well as support them.

A local example from Denmark

The original paper considers Denmark, Western Australia, as an example of the relationship between creative activity and community life. Its discussion draws on the Shire's Sustainability Strategy and material about Denmark Arts, including Brave New Works and the Easter Markets (Shire of Denmark, 2021; Denmark Arts Council, 2025).

These initiatives illustrate how local creative activity can provide opportunities to make, present work, gather and participate in shared experiences. Their connection with local practitioners and community settings is relevant to the paper's argument that cultural development grows through relationships and an understanding of place.

The example is illustrative. This paper does not independently evaluate attendance, accessibility or the effects of these activities on wellbeing. Claims about their reach and outcomes would require evidence from participants, organisers and people who do not currently take part.

The original discussion also recognises wider pressures in regional communities, including access to services and housing. Creative participation may contribute to belonging, but it cannot resolve these structural concerns on its own. Sustaining community cultural life requires attention to resources and opportunities as well as enthusiasm.

Judging the contribution of a program

Arts and sport initiatives are often asked to demonstrate results within short funding periods. Yet relationships, confidence and belonging may develop gradually, and their significance can differ between participants. Evaluation needs to make these experiences visible while remaining clear about what the evidence can establish (Kenny & Connors, 2017).

Attendance and repeat participation are useful information. They can be considered alongside accounts of feeling welcome, forming relationships, learning skills or having influence over the activity. Organisers also need to understand barriers faced by people who stop attending or never join.

Participants should help define what success means locally. A program might aim to support sustained involvement, strengthen connections across groups or provide opportunities for cultural expression. These purposes call for different questions and may require follow up over time.

Evaluation should also examine unintended effects. An initiative may strengthen one group while leaving others excluded, or rely on unpaid effort that becomes difficult to sustain. Positive experiences deserve recognition, alongside an honest account of limits and the resources required.

Implications for community practice

The discussion points towards several connected priorities. Begin with local knowledge and involve people in decisions early enough for their contributions to affect the design. Examine practical barriers to participation and the less visible questions of welcome, influence and representation.

Support opportunities for continued involvement where they are valued, with realistic resources and responsibilities. Consider whether activities strengthen existing connections, create new ones or do both. Make room for different forms of expression and for people whose interests are less established within community organisations.

Finally, match claims to evidence. Arts and sport can make worthwhile contributions without being presented as solutions to every social problem. Clear purposes and thoughtful evaluation make it easier to understand their contribution and decide what support they need.

Conclusion

Culture shapes what development means to the people involved. Arts and sport contribute to community life through opportunities for expression, relationships and participation. They also help people sustain and reshape cultural practices themselves.

The value of these approaches depends on the conditions surrounding them. Local relevance, access, decision making and continued support all matter. Bringing these questions into planning and evaluation can help communities develop activities that reflect what people value and give more people a meaningful opportunity to take part.

Publication note

This is an adapted public edition of university coursework. It retains the original paper's central argument and selected references. It does not provide a new evaluation of local initiatives or an updated review of the literature.

References

Offord, B., Kerruish, E., Garbutt, R., Wessell, A. and Pavlovic, K. (2015). Inside Australian culture : legacies of enlightenment values. London: Anthem Press.

Christensen, J.F. (2024). Pathway to Flow. Square Peg.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Dordrecht Springer Netherlands.

Clammer, J. (2014). Art, Culture and International Development. Routledge.

Coalter, F. (2010). Sport-for-development: going beyond the boundary? Sport in Society, 13(9). doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2010.510675.

Denmark Arts Council. (2025). Denmark Arts Council.

Fancourt, D. (2026). Art Cure. Celadon Books.

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Ife, J. (2016). Community development in an uncertain world: Vision, analysis and practice. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

Kenny, S. and Connors, P. (2017). Developing communities for the future. 5th ed. Cengage Learning Australia.

Kidd, B. (2011). Cautions, Questions and Opportunities in Sport for Development and Peace. Third World Quarterly, 32(3). doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.573948

MacGregor, N. (2011). A history of the world in 100 objects. New York: Viking.

Matarasso, F. (2023) Foreword, in Ware, V. et al. (eds), Routledge Handbook of Arts and Global Development, Taylor & Francis, London.

Putnam, R.D. (2000). Bowling alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sen, A. (1999). Development as Freedom. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shire of Denmark (2021) Sustainability Strategy 2021–2031. Denmark, WA: Shire of Denmark.

Wilson, S.-A. (2015). Identity, culture and the politics of community development. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.