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Cultural Relations in Action: Two British Council Examples ^[1]

What is a cultural relations approach and what does it look like in grant-giving? This article focuses on two examples of British Council grants programmes – the [International Collaboration Grants](#) and the [Cultural Protection Fund](#) – and explores how the cultural relations approach might be enabled internationally.

In 2022, the British Council commissioned Floresca Karanàsou to study how and what kind of cultural relations developed among partner organisations, collaborating through the 22/23 International Collaboration Grants round, and to investigate what constitutes an international cultural relations approach to grants-giving.

Notably, the study explores how mutuality, equality, inequality and equity were experienced in practice. It tells the story of how partners got to know each other and the cultural relations they experienced through a series of illustrated case studies featuring International Collaboration Grantee partners and projects. [The case studies are useful resources for future grantees and are available online.](#)

The research compares the approaches of cultural relations organisations including EUNIC and Goethe-Institut—and their relationship to national arts councils—to define what is unique about a cultural relations approach. Below are summarised findings from the research study, “Cultural Relations in Action.”

What made international collaboration relationships work?

- Having worked with the other organisation before or knowing each other and how they work
- Complementarity in what each organisation brought to the collaboration.
- Openness and transparency in dealing with each other
- Being like-minded in their field/project theme or having common values, backgrounds or political stances on the core issue of their field/ art form
- Shared enthusiasm about their project’s objective or about learning new things or doing a good job
- Meeting together regularly or frequently
- Having fun or making it ‘playful’
- Recognising that organisations in other parts of the world are facing the same issues and learning from how they deal with them

What contributed to building trust?

- Regular online meetings/calls and in-depth consultation with openness and transparency

- Joint decision-making
- Agreeing to a generous collaboration policy at the beginning of the project
- Agreeing to joint ownership of the project outputs
- Bonding by overcoming adversity and difficulties together
- Getting to know the other person or the partner organisations, their approach and thinking on the project theme
- Shared commitment to delivering quality, or “being in it” for the cultural exchange rather than financial gain
- Distributing the grant fairly

How did partners understand cultural relations?

- It is primarily about the relationship. Dialogue between people to achieve mutual understanding, but also outcomes from a collaboration (although dialogue is most important).
- Exchanging, sharing, and learning from each other, especially about how art is understood and translated. New ways of creating, new formats, cross-fertilisation
- Respecting diversity, understanding of difference and acceptance of it, not imposing a certain way of viewing culture or of doing things
- Meeting as people beyond just the art form and being able to see value in each other
- Cultural diplomacy, or a kind of soft politics

What is distinct about the international cultural relations approach?

Both research reports, as well as evaluations from both grant programmes, highlight that cultural relations organisations focus on relationship building. These organizations view grant giving as building and supporting long term trust, understanding and relationships – the outcomes of cultural relations.

Both reports also show that mutuality and reciprocity were present in most of the partnerships. This mutuality was manifested in practice as “mutual respect,” “mutual support,” mutuality in learning, sharing ideas and co-creating, joint decision-making, trying to find common ground and negotiating, “reciprocity of welcome and generosity,” a kind of “reciprocal forgiving,” or the fact that partners visited each other’s countries during the project. These characteristics demonstrate what cultural relations can look like in practice on the ground.

The research found that the added value of the cultural relations approach, when compared to the approach of national arts councils, primarily lies in the “accompaniment” of grantees during their collaborations. Cultural relations organisations, including the British Council, organise gatherings of grantees to meet and explore partnering together or to develop further relationships or a sense of community. Their staff members support grantees when they encounter difficulties during the implementation of their projects and they provide grantees with various additional resources.

Pursuing fairness or equality in international partnerships is at the core of the cultural relations approach and these principles are also what make the cultural relations approach innovative.

Cultural Relations organisations are also committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and linking the outcomes of their work to them.

Developing co created partnerships based on fairness, routed in local contexts, built over time but also linked globally together with equity and equality at the heart of the partnerships are core elements of the international cultural relations approach which then enables and builds the platform for longer terms outcomes around trust and international connection.

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