

Cultural Cooperation

Cultural Cooperation has a mutually beneficial partnership with refugees and asylum seekers. Many exiled artists appear in its festivals and, in turn, the organisation helps them to build sustainable careers in the UK through its professional development opportunities and its education programme.

Cultural Cooperation emerged out of London's Commonwealth Institute 20 years ago and has been offering access to world music, art and performance since. Refugees and asylum seekers have played a significant role in its work since 1999.

It runs the biennial Music Village, a free festival held in major London parks which is Europe's longest running world culture festivals. It hosts a weekend Diaspora London festival in alternate years, and is organising a World City 2012 event to celebrate the Olympics.

Around half of the performers at Cultural Cooperation's festivals are international artists. The festivals are an important platform for artists and, reciprocally, the turnover of incoming artists enhances the international offer of the event, keeping it artistically fresh and diverse.

Many artists are exiled or recently arrived migrants – Cultural Cooperation actively avoids use of the term refugees and asylum seekers to reduce the risk of this stigmatising artists and hampering their inclusion. But it also works with artists who have been in the UK for 50 years and can offer support to more recent arrivals.

Cultural Cooperation has created a network for these artists in the form of London Diaspora Capital, a digital database hosted on its website. The Baring Foundation is providing funding to help expand and develop work with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants through this network.

The organisation selects artists for its festivals and its network carefully. It targets those who actively try to re-interpret and re-engage with - the various cultural traditions of their (or their parents') countries of origin in the context of their newly chosen homeland of Britain.

It offers each group or soloist selected their own professionally created an audio-visual profile – at no cost. 250 groups and solo artists from 75 different faith groups or nationalities in 29 London Boroughs have made use of this facility. Listed artists meet at networking and social events where they can share cultural traditions and perform together informally, and from which new collaborations grow.

More recently, Cultural Cooperation has started developing parallel strands of activity, using its knowledge of cross-cultural dialogue and the experience of exile and displacement to teach young people about cultural diversity. It offers world culture workshops in primary, secondary and special needs schools, museums and community venues.

Once again, this strand of activity offers an opportunity for exiled and migrant artists to use and develop their skills. Cultural Cooperation provides training for artists in running workshops and residencies. It now has almost 50 artists accredited to work in museums and schools.

Prakash Daswani, Director of Cultural Cooperation, explains: “London Diaspora Capital is more than just a database. It is an infrastructure and a network and it builds up tremendous resources of goodwill and trust and can give artists a great sense of affirmation.

“It has an important impact on their visibility, giving them a professional profile, but also a sense that they belong, and an opportunity to connect with others who have been through similar experiences. This stops them feeling so isolated and makes them feel part of a larger collectivity.”

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