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Festivals in South East Asia

Catalysts for the
Creative Economy

Executive Summary
2022



Image Credit: Pesta Boneka



Over the past few years, national sustainable development planning has recognised the cultural and creative sectors as levers to advance cultural, social and economic outcomes. ... However, the transversal role played by culture and creativity in sustainable development...remains widely underinvested

UNESCO, Reshaping policies for creativity: addressing culture as a global public

This Report presents an overview of the dynamic and impactful role of festivals across the creative economy of South East Asia. It is commissioned by the British Council and explores how festivals are driving impact across the region, as anchors and catalysts for an inclusive and sustainable creative economy. The report introduces case studies and country overviews from Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. It describes the aspirations and development needs of festivals so they are equipped to play a central role in a post-Covid creative economy.

The report shows how:

- Festivals connect heritage to the contemporary and they signal opportunities for the future.
- Festivals are vital platforms for talent development, providing opportunities for artists and creative practitioners to develop their practice, reach and engage audiences and go to the next stage of their creative journey and career.
- Festivals are generators of cultural narratives and creative content, commissioning and presenting new work from music to fashion, design to film.
- Festivals are central to the formation of creative enterprises and runways for business development across the multiple value chains of the creative economy. Not only do they showcase talent, but they also provide employment and facilitate growth opportunities for all types of creative enterprise, both directly and via their spill over effects.
- Festivals often provide safe spaces for diverse creative expression, introducing talent from all backgrounds to the creative economy.
- Festivals are platforms for innovation, drawing on multiple influences, embracing technology and interacting with audiences. They are at their hearts spaces for experimentation and boundary-crossing practice.
- Festivals support local communities, engaging intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, enhancing the quality of place.
- Festivals offer an urgency, activism and impact-facing agenda, vital for our times.

But festivals, like the rest of the creative economy, are in crisis. Pre-Covid, most festivals flourished as live events dependent on face-to-face interaction. They are places to meet, interact and actively participate. The Covid-19 pandemic halted such an approach, requiring many festivals to postpone or cancel, and accelerating a shift toward a more hybrid reality, where digital solutions facilitate a new model. But this new model also risks leaving some festivals behind, especially in areas with limited digital infrastructure and capacity. Many festivals have ceased operating. Others have benefited from government rescue funding. Most are hanging on in there, ready to re-boot in a more hybrid reality as the pandemic recedes.



2021 was the UN Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, with many activities postponed to 2022 due to the pandemic. In February 2022, UNESCO launched its Re-Shaping Policies for Creativity report, which champions the role of culture and the creative economy in addressing global challenges. This involves an ‘ecosystem perspective,’ recognising the interdependence of ‘not-for-profit’ and ‘commercial’ creative work; where artists and creative practitioners are to the core of a resilient and sustainable creative economy, delivering intrinsic and social value which underpins any possibility of ‘economic growth’.

Festivals are central to this re-imagined creative economy, delivering opportunities for sustainable development by nurturing an ecosystem which champions creative talent, connects us with the past, and helps re-imagine the future. In South East Asia, festivals will play a central role in the cultural recovery and wellbeing of communities; they will supercharge a renaissance of creative practice; and they will contribute to the transition of local economies toward a more inclusive and sustainable footing.

This report provides extensive analysis of how festivals can drive this new post-Covid era of the creative economy. But it also provides a warning that festivals are in crisis: they are in need of strategic investment to build capacity and skills to deliver a revamp in scale and impact. They need support to drive-up their profile and re-engage with audiences. They are fragile, their confidence punctured, resources diminished. They are ready to scale-up and support the region's collective renewal. But this requires a re-framed value proposition where festivals are recognised for their social impact and influence on wellbeing and sustainability. They do contribute to tourism and provide a superhighway for creative enterprise, but at their heart and at their best, festivals deliver social and cultural value, uplift our lives and offer inspiration and renewal.

This report describes how festivals are delivering impact in South East Asia and, with smart policy and investment, networking and exchange, how they can deliver more.



Image Credit: Bangkok Design Week

¹<https://www.unesco.org/reports/reshaping-creativity/2022/en/download-report>

Role and Impact of Festivals



Malaysia

- Festivals are a huge force for development, innovation, and inclusive growth across the Malaysian creative economy
- Their diversity is testament to the ethnic and regional diversity of the country and to the scope and potential of festivals to reflect on and amplify the contemporary realities of culture in Malaysia
- Festivals operate in a 'mixed economy' drawing on public and private finance for sustainability and signaling ways forward for a more resilient creative economy.

Singapore

- Festivals are important development platforms for creative talent and play a central role in the nation's creative economy and cultural relations activities
- The media and critics see festivals as important indicators of cultural vibrancy for the city state
- Over half of festivals in Singapore are over 10 years old and are therefore established contributors to the cultural ecosystem
- The average size of live audiences for festivals is under 5,000, with micro festivals important contributors to overall vibrancy

Indonesia

- Festivals in Indonesia play a vital role in nurturing a diverse and inclusive creative economy. They support local cultural development, showcase talent and add value to tourism as well as support international cultural relations
- Mostly initiated by young people, festivals are a cultural and educational space which champion diverse talent and connect heritage to contemporary culture
- Many festivals are impact-facing and awareness-raising – such as on environmental sustainability, on social inclusion and on supporting minority voices.

Vietnam

- Festivals are being positioned as vital catalysts for urban creative economy development
- The festival scene is still very emergent and fragile in Vietnam, with significant dependence on Government support (for funding and to avoid censorship).
- The increased importance afforded by the Government to the Cultural and Creative Industries mean festivals in Vietnam are sure to play an important role in post-Covid recovery and renewal.
- Festivals are increasingly focused on connecting heritage to contemporary culture – e.g. linking crafts to design and technology.

Philippines

- Festivals help raise awareness of the Arts and wider cultural sector in building sector communities and in breeding pride and responsibility
- Festivals are also critical connectors between grassroots cultural activity and the more commercially facing creative industries
- Festivals are broadly operating in a mixed economy. 40% are solely government owned. 66% of the festivals run on a mixed format of free and ticketed events.

Thailand

- Festivals are a runway for talent development, sparking innovative practice and feeding sustainable development
- Festivals have shown resilience and entrepreneurship to diversify income streams – e.g. 70% have commercial sponsors and 60% have government investment
- Festivals in Thailand have built networks of artists which connect grassroots activities to regional and national creative economy development.

