

# Responding to violence through art and culture

## Lessons from Michoacán

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### Key messages

- This ODI Briefing Paper explores the role that art and cultural activities can play in helping societies respond and give testimony to the experience of violence. It focuses on two case study locations in Michoacán in Mexico: Lázaro Cárdenas and Apatzingán.
- In post-conflict settings, art and culture can contribute to healing and reconciliation, and social cohesion by giving voice to trauma and injustice, and restoring social bonds and non-violent forms of exchange within communities.
- Public resourcing of cultural activities and art that targets hard-to-reach grassroots organisations that have fewer opportunities or more limited access to public funding or other resources can benefit vulnerable groups.
- Local ownership of cultural resources, and local control over which cultural activities to resource, is important in ensuring that these activities are anchored in the local values of communities and in shared experiences and histories of violence.
- Transparency in how resources are used to support cultural activities is important in order to limit power or normative biases that may determine which artistic narratives are prioritised.
- Support should facilitate networks across local, national and international art and cultural activities to enable exchange and innovation in response to context-specific experiences of violence and vulnerability.



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Throughout history, art forms and cultural expression have been part of societal responses to conflict, violence, repression and human rights abuse, and the silencing of identity (Bailey, 2019; McPherson et al., 2018). Across all societies there is a long tradition of art, music and literary forms as purposeful expressions of protest and denunciation of political violence and social injustice, giving visibility to otherwise ‘silenced’ or invisible experiences of violence. Such cultural activities can be used for the purpose of memorialisation, healing, reconciliation and ‘truth-telling’. Cultural activities can help rebuild a sense of community and social cohesion and give voice to legacies and experiences of conflict or crime-related violence through music, visual arts, performance, literature and poetry.

An emerging set of international interventions in conflict-affected settings has sought to support cultural activities and art forms that aim to counter or address conflict-related violence. These are often connected with transitional justice associated with truth-telling, memorialisation, healing and reconciliation through the performative experience of different art forms. Measures to support cultural activities for peace in Colombia, for instance, have included providing space for young people affected by conflict and poverty to come together and share music as a way of rebuilding social relations and reintegrating conflict victims (Bailey, 2018).

Cultural activism (driven by societal actors) and cultural policy (which is state-led) encompass very diverse forms of social mobilisation around art and culture as well as purposeful public policy. Underlying these is a belief in the cathartic value of artistic expression to address the legacies, or ongoing trauma, of violent experiences, and an expectation that cultural policy can contribute to social cohesion and societal resilience.

The experience of Michoacán is relevant to wider debates on the role of art, cultural activism and cultural policy in responding to different

experiences of violence, both in conflict settings and in contexts where crime-related violence is systemic and prevalent.

## Art and cultural activism in Michoacán

Political, social and crime-related violence in Michoacán has left thousands dead and led to widespread vulnerability to extreme insecurity. Violence includes forced disappearances, kidnapping, torture and sexual violence. Social and political violence and the threat of violence in Mexico have historically been routine forms of coercion, targeting individuals and organisations perceived as a threat to the individual and group interests of dominant social, political and economic actors. Violence is enmeshed in the wider political economy of Mexico’s development model, with community-specific impacts on the use of natural resources and related disputes and grievances, for instance around mining and land grabs for the cultivation of avocado. Violence in turn interacts with illicit economic activity, including drug-trafficking and related criminality, alongside the capture and penetration of political power, justice and security mechanisms at the state level (Maldonado, 2018; Gledhill, 2017). Access to services and civic space, particularly for vulnerable groups, is highly constrained, and community bonds are fraying.

In this context, people in Michoacán have in some cases turned to art, performance and cultural activities as a response to extreme criminal, political and social violence. Art and culture is used to counter the wider experience of violence, both through bottom-up social activism and through cultural policy and public resourcing. Since 2012, for example, the National Crime Prevention Programme (PRONAPRED) has included funding for cultural and peace activities. This public investment is premised on the assumption that cultural activities can lead to a culture of peace and enable the (re)construction of social cohesion.

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1 This briefing draws on findings from the research project ‘Assessing the potential of civil organizations within regions affected by organized crime to hold state institutions to human rights-based development’ (University of Aberdeen, Colegio de Michoacán, CIDE-Aguascalientes and ODI). This has reviewed societal responses to violence in contexts of organised crime and institutional fragility. The authors would like to thank Marija Atanaskova and Samantha Theminimulle for their review and comments.

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Recourse to art and culture – both societal and state-driven – is in keeping with emerging international discourse on the merits of using cultural space to rebuild community bonds, and create alternative forms of social-interaction-based values of peace and non-violent forms of social exchange, thus reducing interpersonal, social and criminal violence. In practice, how cultural activism has unfolded, how it has interacted with government-driven cultural policy and resources, and with what impact, varies across Michoacán. But some common features seem to be evident.

Cultural activism includes citizens' endeavours to engage in social and political participation through performance, art and shared cultural life, thereby exercising some form of voice and agency against violence. It may invoke an idealised image of the past, free of violence and appealing to a regional identity based on a shared set of values, norms and 'rootedness', grounded in a common history of community. There is a belief in the transformative power of art and culture, which can be experienced at a collective or individual level, and individual or collective activism aims to champion change, advance social and political causes, and improve justice.

## Cultural activism in Lázaro Cárdenas and Apatzingán

The Briefing Paper focuses on two urban areas in Michoacán; Lázaro Cárdenas, a port city on the Pacific coast, and Apatzingán, in central Michoacán.

### Lázaro Cárdenas

Lázaro Cárdenas has a population of 183,000. The town has been badly affected by the decline of the steel industry, resulting in social and economic marginalisation and increasing organised crime, drugs and gang-related activities. In this context, culture activities and art have emerged as societal efforts to counter violence and stimulate non-violent forms of social interaction. Cultural activism takes two broad forms. The first is the emergence of independent cultural centres providing protected physical spaces for music, dance and painting. The centres, which are coordinated by

local cultural entrepreneurs, are open to local residents, and act as spaces for people to meet and interact safe from violence.

Second, neighbourhood-based activities in the heart of the town, organised by local people, focus on reclaiming public spaces such as squares and parks from gangs, drug dealers and petty criminals. This includes the old *malecón* (pier) and *la Pérgola*. The aim is to reclaim public areas for family and leisure activities and safe social interaction. This involves displacing drug users and traffickers and youth and gang-related violence, addressing the physical deterioration of the city centre, restoring traditional cultural dance and musical activities, and organising concerts and other performing arts to rebuild a sense of collective belonging and shared identity around the town's history.

Cultural activism focuses on the following objectives:

- Creating space for individual and collective non-violent social exchange in the more marginalised areas of the town.
- Reaffirming regional values and identity based on a shared memory of the town's history, and in doing so achieving a shared sense of belonging and community bonds.
- Creating safe spaces – both in public areas of the town and within independent cultural centres.

Cultural activism in Lázaro Cárdenas has been poorly resourced, receiving virtually no public funds, and cannot be expected to have a substantive impact on the structural realities of social and crime-related violence.

Despite resourcing and wider structural challenges, there are some concrete forms of impact. The cultural centres demonstrate the importance of locally developed cultural life in keeping with community-based values and codes of non-violent social interaction. By reclaiming public spaces and making them safer, local residents have increased access to cultural activities in marginalised areas of the city. Finally, through art and performance, and in work with children and women, it has been possible to give voice and visibility to often silenced forms of violence (for instance domestic violence).

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### **Box 1 The Centro Cultural Juksikani**

The *Centro Cultural Juksikani* in Lázaro Cárdenas has created a space to engage youth in cultural activities, which they convene and develop themselves. Art forms relevant to their age and life experience have become part of the activities of the centre, include graffiti art, theatre, literature and reggae music. Enabling alternative forms of social engagement for young people within the safe space of the centre's workshop activities offers an alternative to delinquency and addiction.

### **Box 2 The Centro Cultural Catalina Carbajal**

In the case of the *Centro Cultural Catalina Carbajal*, it has been possible to create a safe space for women and children to attend workshops, where they share their experiences of domestic and gender-based violence. The workshops, facilitated by psychologists, enable participants (mostly women) to share and address their experiences through painting, creating a therapeutic environment combining art with counselling. Psychologists provide joint counselling and therapy through art and performance.

## **Apatzingán**

Apatzingán is a city of 120,000 people located in the west of the central region of Michoacán. The region is rich in natural resources, with a long history of cattle-raising and citrus production. It is also a regional trade hub, and has become a centre for the production and distribution of illicit drugs. This has brought with it a substantial organised crime presence, and heightened vulnerabilities to associated forms of violence and trauma. Here, recourse to art and culture in order to counter the wider culture of impunity and violence has unfolded against a backdrop of socio-economic decline and rising crime.

Cultural activism in Apatzingán ranges from the work of prominent figures in the world of art and culture to smaller forms of collective mobilisation around art and performance (such as the *Revolución Cultural*) and more formal associations and formats (such as the *Centro Cultural Naranja* and *La Casa de la Cultura La Estación*), which since 2014 have drawn on public funds devoted to cultural activities. The state-funded *Centro Cultural del Fondo de Cultura Económica* has a library, bookshop, theatre space and cinema.

There is no single model for the use of art or culture as a response to violence. Rather, there is a very wide range of experiences and activities, including book fairs, literary and cultural festivals and poetry meetings, workshops around music, dance and making musical instruments, and

(protest) marches. These vary across communities and generational preferences. They can be by individual artists or involve group activities, and reflect the diverse ways in which communities, social and generational groups relate to art and use it as a response to violence.

This variety of cultural activism reflects different levels of organisational capacity, as well as varying degrees of independence from state funding, and thus the ability to be critical of official versions of violence. Greater independence among artists or cultural activities allows for more independent expressions of protest and denunciation of violence (including the complicities and practices of impunity associated with it). More denunciatory expressions of art are typically also more poorly resourced.

It is important to underline the structural inequalities across different forms of cultural activism. This affects both the resourcing and organisational capabilities of this activism, as well as the opportunities citizens have to access or experience cultural forms and activities. Some are more denunciatory in their approach, in some cases using subversive or subaltern expressions of protest in ways that fit local understandings of art (see Box 3). Others are more distinctly oriented towards giving voice and visibility to particular forms and experiences of violence – and diverse forms of trauma.

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### Box 3 *Poemantas*

*Poemantas* are textiles created to express denunciatory poetry on violence. The *poemantas* thus constitute a subversive use of *narcomantas* – the banners put up by criminal organisations with messages of threat and intimidation, and which may also seek to magnify the presence of these organisations. The *poemantas* aim to counter expressions of narco-culture that reify cultures of violence and violent masculinities.

national crime prevention policy since 2014 and international narratives around the instrumental value of art and culture in contributing to peace, is the shared belief that art and cultural activities can offer alternative modes and spaces for social exchange. This includes deliberate efforts to engage with young people and support alternative activities that both challenge violence as a form of social exchange, and create space for others to engage in creative activities (through different forms of art and performance). The aim is to rebuild a shared sense of community and values grounded in peace and mutual respect.

At the same time, there are also common challenges and limitations across all these forms of cultural activism. This includes the fear of backlash and reprisal from armed or criminal groups, a widespread lack of trust in state agencies and competition for scarce resources.

In Apatzingán, the objectives of cultural activism include:

- Transforming the region into a centre of art and culture, aimed at encouraging peaceful forms of social interaction, and rebuilding the social fabric in a very violent context.
- Recovering traditional regional art forms, in part to restore an (idealised) sense of shared values of non-violence and community bonds based on a common history and identity.
- Promoting cultural spaces for young people and children, enabling alternative forms of social exchange not based on violence. This includes deliberate efforts to counteract public messaging by organised crime groups that glorifies narco-culture and associated cultures of violent masculinity.

New cultural spaces have been created and activities developed in marginalised areas, alongside an ‘alternative’ cultural agenda that

can give visibility to and denounce different forms of violence in Michoacán, and associated complicities in public office that ensure that impunity prevails. Cultural activities also provide the space for public discussion on the themes of art and culture, where the intrinsic value of art is celebrated as a form of social and spiritual communication, and as reaffirming shared community values and identity. Mobilisation around cultural activities also opens up the space for new forms of social networks, popular mobilisation and opportunities to collaborate with government institutions to promote artistic and cultural projects.

### Impacts and challenges

In both Lázaro Cárdenas and Apatzingán, key drivers in the development of cultural activities involve citizens seeking to recover public space in order to restore a sense of community and reduce vulnerability to violence, and cultural entrepreneurs and artists, who use art and performance to give voice to experiences of, and vulnerabilities to, violence.

The intrinsic value of art as an experiential mechanism for engaging with the harsh realities of life (individually and collectively) is evident in the different activities explored here. Both the performative experience of art and its communication to different audiences are reaffirmations of identity. They give meaning to a shared experience of the social and political context, and its violence, and to the possibility of change and contestation.

Artists and cultural entrepreneurs also focus on the instrumental role of art and access to cultural activities in helping to foster a culture of non-violent social exchange, giving visibility to the trauma and extent of multi-dimensional realities of violence, and denouncing the drivers



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of violence and impunity. The experience of art and cultural activities can also have the effect of transforming collective and individual experiences of the present, and raising expectations of a less violent future.

In both cases, local ownership of cultural forms is clearly important. In order for art and cultural activities to be meaningful in rebuilding social bonds and promoting peaceful interaction, they need to be defined and co-created by community members and citizens across different generational and identity groups. For culture to enable inclusivity, it needs to engage with diversity in order to give voice to the intersecting inequalities and vulnerabilities that run through Michoacán society.

Significant forms of impact include:

- Cultural activities can help create safe spaces for social and community life in a complex and violent context.
- Art forms can give visibility to silenced experiences of violence, which can in turn create narratives of solidarity and over time help in reconstructing the social fabric through engaging explicitly with trauma and the legacies of violence. This also contributes to raising awareness of structural violence beyond the community, and indeed beyond Michoacán and Mexico.
- Cultural exchange can contribute to wider processes of political and social mobilisation, not least by enhancing people's voice and agency through art and cultural expression.
- Art and culture can help heal collective and individual experiences of violence, and pave the way for a collective narrative of peace and non-violent social exchange.
- Finally, cultural activism is in itself constitutive of voice and agency in efforts to counter violence.

Challenges and limitations include:

- In practice, art and cultural initiatives have limited impact on the structural drivers of violence, and it is important to be realistic about the role of art and culture in contributing to transformative social and

political change. This is especially so given the 'stickiness' of institutional fragility and the pervasive socio-political complications that protect impunity.

- There is always a risk that cultural activism is captured by powerful interests, all the more so when it is publicly funded. This risk is exacerbated by the exclusionary effect of bureaucratic criteria for eligibility for funding, which can result in state bodies (or stakeholders close to political power) controlling cultural resources and art.
- The scarcity of resources and leadership and the fact that local government selects who to give money to based on informal ties of loyalty generates tensions and conflict among different groups.
- The risk of backlash and reprisals cannot be under-estimated – not least as the wider political economy of structural violence and exclusion remains untouched.

## Recommendations

In post-conflict settings, art and culture can contribute to healing and reconciliation and to rebuilding social cohesion to the extent to which it gives voice to trauma and injustice, and to the possibility of restoring social trust and a shared sense of the value of non-violent forms of exchange. The Michoacán case highlights common themes about the role of art in helping societies give testimony to the experience of violence.

- The experiences of Lázaro Cárdenas and Apatzingán underline the merits of funding activities for culture and art that target less visible grassroots organisations that have limited access to public funding or other resources.
- The two cases show the importance of local ownership of and identification with cultural activities, to ensure that they are anchored in the local values of communities and shared experiences and histories of violence.
- Transparency in how resources are used to support cultural activities can help limit biases in determining which artistic narratives are prioritised.

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- National or international support should engage with sub-national conditions to ensure that investments tap into existing art forms and organic cultural mobilisation, enabling (sustainable) participation, voice and agency around experiences of violence through art.
  - Support should facilitate networks across local, national and international art and

cultural activities to enable peer exchange and innovation across different experiences of the use of art to reflect on and counter context-specific experiences of violence and vulnerability.

- Support can help facilitate the co-construction of alternative non-violent forms of exchange between cultural agents, citizens and the state.

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