BANGLADESH
Assessment of COVID-19 Impact on Culture Sector in Bangladesh
Assessment Findings
April - September 2020
Key Findings

All cultural actors in Bangladesh – including individual professionals (whether salaried, freelance or entrepreneurs) and cultural institutions (public, private & civil society-run) – have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on physical gatherings and travel. Pre-existing issues and challenges faced by the cultural sector, such as very low wages for artists and frequent copyright infringements, have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Widespread loss of income has been reported by cultural professionals as well as cultural institutions. The negative impact has been felt in all parts of cultural and creative value chains, including in the creation, production, distribution and access to cultural goods and services. For example:

- Crafts people have been adversely affected due to their traditional dependence on a busy schedule of local fairs and festivals, which were all cancelled. Textile artisans have been affected due to the closure and slowdown of sales and exports among fashion houses.
- Visual and performing arts and artists have adapted rapidly to the digital & hybrid models, although remuneration to artists for online services rendered remains challenging.
- The publishing sector has cited loss of income due to difficulties with distribution during the lockdown. Few online sales platforms exist which are gaining popularity.
- The cultural heritage sector has been severely affected as regular maintenance of heritage sites was suspended and museums closed, impeding the safeguarding of tangible cultural heritage.

To cope with the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government, civil society and the private sector support the cultural and creative sectors in Bangladesh by providing financial support, networking, and capacity-building training.

The Government has reiterated its commitment to the creative economy through the establishment of a new UNESCO-Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman International Prize for the Creative Economy, to be awarded every 2 years, starting in 2021.

“One might feel depressed or become hopeless but at the end our motto is truth, beauty, prosperity and hope. Our culture believes in celebrating life. We faced a lot of troubles but we always defeated these troubles. Through Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy we tried to say that these troubles are not only human-made but nature-made too, but we always faced them and won.”

By Mr. Liaquat Ali Lucky
Director General, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy
Ministry of Cultural Affairs
“For realizing the leadership potential, it’s important that the youth of this country go through the reflection process and have some wide spaces so that they can realize what they aspire to be and strategize to get to the point.”

By Mr. Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj
Country Representative
The Asia Foundation

“I trust that during this COVID-19 situation and in future, youth generation will work as a pioneer to develop a self-civilized society.”

By Mr. Badre Munir Firdaus
Joint Secretary (Youth)
Ministry of Youth and Sports

“We need three types of skills such as “learning skills” – creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication; “literacy skills” – information literacy, media literacy and technology literacy; “life skills” – flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, social to develop entrepreneurship skills of youth.”

By Mr. Md. Rafiqul Islam
Head of Education and Life Skills Programme and Educational Technology Expert
Aspire to Innovate (a2i), ICT Division

“We need a strong media through which we can access to artists’ creative contents.”

By Ms. Karishma Sanu Sovvota
Singer and Songwriter

“These present scenarios of COVID-19 can be tackled by policy as well.”

By Mr. Omer Aiaz
Actor
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With the support of

Sweden Sverige
1. Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented health crisis that triggered a stark economic downturn in most countries around the world, including in Bangladesh. Artists and cultural professionals are particularly affected.

While the pandemic continues to unfold in Bangladesh, it has already revealed and magnified the culture and creative sectors’ pre-existing challenges and vulnerabilities in myriad ways. Whilst some of the impacts of COVID-19 on the cultural sector in Bangladesh can be quantified, other aspects and facets of the impact are difficult to be measured.

To get a better picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the cultural and creative sector and its stakeholders in Bangladesh, the UNESCO Office in Dhaka responded to a call by the Minister of Cultural Affairs and conducted an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the culture sector in Bangladesh.

The assessment employed a mixed methods approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data which engaged more than two hundred (200) artists, cultural professionals, representatives of cultural organizations, Government representatives, as well as other key stakeholders and the public.

The aim of the Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Culture Sector in Bangladesh was:

- To inform diverse stakeholders, including duty-bearers and rights-holders, on detailed aspects of the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the culture sector in Bangladesh
- To obtain up-to-date information on the status of the culture sector within the context of COVID-19
- To identify immediate and future responses and mitigation measures to the crisis

2. Approach, Methodology, Scope and Limitations

2.1 Approach and Methodology

The approach to the assessment stresses the significance of hearing the voices of diverse artists and cultural professionals in the cultural and creative sector, as well as stakeholders working with them. This approach aimed at facilitating the objective of gathering, organizing, and analyzing information and testimonies, while encouraging participation and ensuring that an inclusive research methodology was followed.

This overview of the assessment findings draws on sample data from a combination of qualitative and quantitative primary and secondary data collected and analyzed over the course of April to September 2020. Qualitative and quantitative data sources include a conducted comprehensive impact assessment survey, focus group discussions/webinars with key stakeholders, as well as a desk analysis of available secondary literature, reports, and data.

A) Focus Group Discussions/Webinars: To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on different creative and cultural sectors, a series of four (4) Focus Group Discussions/Webinars was conducted:

- **Webinar 1**: How Artists and Cultural Professionals Can Ensure their Livelihood During and After COVID-19 (19 May 2020)
- **Webinar 2**: Is Digital Environment the right option (way forward) for Creative Industry, or a temporary solution? (10 June 2020)
- **Webinar 3**: Youth Leadership in Education and Creative Sector in the context of Bangladesh (13 August 2020)
- **Webinar 4**: Government’s Initiatives to Promote Creative Industry and Heritage of Bangladesh during and after COVID-19 (4 September 2020)
A wide selection of culture experts and stakeholders participated in and contributed to the four webinars, which included: ministry representatives and policy specialists, cultural professionals including actors, photographers, singers, and songwriters, creative sector stakeholders including managing directors, heads, and creative chiefs of creative industry enterprises, as well as academics, civil society organization representatives.

B) Impact Assessment Online Survey: To better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications to the cultural and creative community, an online impact assessment survey was conducted. The survey engaged 75 key stakeholders from a representative group of culture actors and provided in-depth information both on the impact as well as on priority issues to be addressed by stakeholders.

C) Desk Analysis: Complementing gathered qualitative and quantitative primary data, a review and desk analysis of secondary literature, reports, and available data – including from UNESCO globally, the Government of Bangladesh, Development Partners, as well as other national, regional, and international sources – was conducted.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender, age and general background

2.2 Limitation of the assessment

This overview of the assessment findings attempts to provide a snapshot of the situation and impact of COVID-19 across different cultural sectors and professions in Bangladesh.

The research team was cognizant of the multifaceted challenges of collecting data from Bangladesh’s cultural sector stakeholders in the midst of the humanitarian crisis presented by the COVID-19, including lockdown measures and other restrictions in place. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, every attempt was made to reach stakeholders to collect first-hand information and allow them to express their experiences in their own words.

Certainly, this summary cannot do justice to the diversity, depth, and scale of the impact of COVID-19 to Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sectors. Neither can it capture all the many and diverse mitigation steps taken by the different stakeholders to cope with the pandemic.

Therefore, this summary should be understood as a collection of examples of the wide range of impacts caused, and mitigation measures adopted.

Quantifying the impact of the pandemic on the cultural and creative sector has been a challenge. While certain quantitative factors (e.g. number of institutions and cultural sites closed, loss of revenue for cultural and creative industries) were available and could be compiled, assessing qualitative aspects of the impact to the cultural sector (e.g. specific consumption of cultural goods and services, changes in business mode, psychological impact on artists and cultural professionals) continues to prove difficult.

The accuracy of the information provided in this assessment was ensured to the best of UNESCO’s ability, taking into account the need to react quickly and in an ever-changing environment.
3. Key Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a stark toll on Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sector. In Bangladesh, as in many other parts of the world, cultural and creative industries play important roles in the sustainable development and cohesion of society. They bring society together, shape values, provide learning opportunities, foster intercultural dialogue, as well as provide a source of income and livelihood to millions of people.

The assessment shows that Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sector is affected at many different levels and in many complex and unforeseen ways. The following sections aim to provide a snapshot overview of some of the most significant impacts for the cultural and creative sector.

3.1 Impact of COVID-19 on professional work of artists, cultural professionals, and cultural institutions

Large parts of the paid and commissioned work of artists and cultural professionals have decreased due to COVID-19 protective measures including required hygiene and social distancing. Only very few activities, especially those carried out online, have increased in number and volume.

As a result of social distancing and other hygiene measures, a strong shift to digital has taken place. The volume of online events and communication through social media has increased exponentially. Bangladeshi audiences are increasingly consuming cultural content online and more permanent shifts in consumer behaviour have been noticed.

Education and training in the cultural sector have been affected. Most scheduled certifying exams and assessments for culture trainees and other exams relevant to the culture profession had to be postponed.

Academic institutions who are offering cultural programmes have been unable to undertake face-to-face learning in traditional classroom settings. As a result, admission rates to cultural programmes declined.

“This to respond the post COVID-19, collective, consultative and determined efforts should be made to ensure the sustainability of cultural and creative industry in Bangladesh.”

By Mr. Iresh Zaker
Actor and Managing Director, Asiatic 360

Figure 2 Work of cultural institutions impacted by COVID-19
3.2 Impact of COVID-19 on the supply and demand of cultural and creative products and services

The negative impact of COVID-19 applies to most culture and creative sectors in Bangladesh. Both the supply of and the demand for cultural goods and services has decreased since the pandemic began in early 2020.

Related impacts can be grouped in medium- and long-term:

Medium-term impacts:

- Similar to many other countries, museums and other cultural spaces in Bangladesh closed at the beginning of the pandemic. As the online survey result indicates, museums and other cultural spaces (including libraries and archives) struggled to maintain regular income, including from visitor fees, sales of books, or from renting out event spaces. A global survey of UNESCO on Museums around the world in the face of COVID-19, estimated that in 2020, nearly 90 percent of museums around the world had been closed for an average of 155 days. In Bangladesh all museums were closed between 26 March and 31 October 2020.

- The cultural heritage sector is severely affected and the safeguarding of tangible cultural heritage through regular archaeological site maintenance has become a great challenge. All regular excavations have stopped as well as all 21 archaeological museums under the Department of Archeology and all heritage sites have been closed due to COVID-19. All archeological sites were closed between 19 March and 16 September 2020.

Long-term impacts:

- Academic institutions fall under the Ministry of Education. Following Government regulations, academic institutions can only teach and work virtually. As a result demand has decreased.

- Many cultural exchange programmes, especially those at the international level, have been cancelled.

3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on income levels of artists and cultural professionals

Looking at the impact of COVID-19 on the income levels of artists, cultural professionals, and of cultural organizations, the assessment shows a strong decline in income and funding in most areas.

When COVID-19 restrictions began, artists, artisans, performers and other cultural professionals started to struggle to receive work within weeks of the outbreak, and as a result saw their incomes dwindle. A few months into the pandemic, most artists and cultural professionals have lost the majority of their work and income. Even when conducting activities online, artists struggle to receive remuneration for performances. For those artists and cultural

Figure 3: Percentage of monthly income lost due to COVID-19
professionals who are salaried, in many cases salaries have been cut or have been discontinued. At the individual level, most artists and cultural professionals reported decreases in their earnings. When asked about the percentage of monthly income, artists and other cultural professionals have lost due to COVID-19, almost 34% of respondents indicated to have lost between 90% to 100% of their income. About 13% of artists indicated to have lost between 80-90% of their income. Overall, 41% of respondents indicated to have lost at least 50% of their monthly income. Only 5% reported that their wages were unaffected.

Similarly, when inquiring about artistic sales (sale of art, commissions, etc.), 69.4% of responding artists and cultural professionals reported a decline. Only 2.8% indicated an increase and 8.3% indicated that their artistic sales were unaffected.

At the organizational level, 41% of respondents indicated a decline in public funding, 53.8% indicated a decline in donations and other contributions, 53.8% in sponsorships, 43.6% in other private funding, 51.3% in product sales, 25.6% in tourism package sales and 28.2% in tourism service sales.

Other financial implications included decreases in income from tuition fees for cultural courses (e.g. photography courses).

Those working for and at cultural organizations also reported to be affected. Looking at staff and volunteers of institutions, 27% of respondents indicated that some of their staff and volunteers are currently on sick leave. 19% of institutions indicated that their staff and volunteers were teleworking full-time, and an additional 13% of institutions had staff and volunteers teleworking part-time. 11% of institutions indicated to have staff and volunteers on unpaid leave (leave with no pay).

Figure 4: Proportion and way staff and volunteers are affected by COVID-19

3.4 Impact of COVID-19 on stress and anxiety levels of artists and cultural professionals in Bangladesh

The assessment enquired the day-to-day stress and anxiety level both before COVID-19 as well as at the time of the survey (during COVID-19) among Bangladeshi artists and cultural professionals.

Respondents indicated stress and anxiety levels on a scale from Level 0 (very low) to Level 10 (very high), with average stress and anxiety levels before COVID-19 standing at around Level 5. At the time of the survey average stress and anxiety levels had reached Level 7.
4. Mitigation Measures

Committed to mitigating the impact of the pandemic to Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sector, the assessment has shown that most stakeholders have started taking special measures and actions.

The following section presents a selection of reported measures that have been adopted in face of the ongoing crisis by cultural and creative industry-based individuals (ref. Figure 6, orange bars) as well as by cultural and creative institutions (ref. Figure 6, blue bars).

A massive, accelerated shift to digital in cultural practices has been taking place since the beginning of the pandemic. More than ever before, artists and creative professionals are embracing digital methods and tools to continue their work from home. All stages of the value chain in the creative sector are showing a shift towards digital.

Many cultural activities have gone digital, for example through online live performances, pre-recorded cultural content, online training workshops, online panel discussions, and partnership & networking online meetings.

Many cultural organizations and professionals have also intensified their online communication to be more visible to audiences and peers. More information and more content is being offered via websites and social media channels.

Cultural and creative industry-based individuals indicated changes in their work, products, and business models. Cultural and creative institutions indicated to have strengthened their communication with network members as a mitigation measure.

Further, both cultural and creative industry-based individuals and institutions reported to be searching for financial aid to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Measures and actions to support Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sector that were initiated during the survey period and later in 2020, include:

- **New UNESCO-Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman International Prize for the Creative Economy**: With support from the Government of Bangladesh, a UNESCO-Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman International Prize for the Creative Economy has been established to recognize outstanding contributions to the creative economy.

Figure 6: Measures taken by individuals/institutions to counter the immediate effects of COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
<th>Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary closure</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change of work/product/business model</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for new audiences, trainees, consumers or customers</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered new services/activities online</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digitalization of existing contents</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensify communication through traditional channels</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensify communication through website and social media</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen communication with network members</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special tourism packages and services offers</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special product offers</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutback of operational costs</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running multiple shifts</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff cutbacks/layoffs</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for financial aid</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Economy was established at the 210th session of UNESCO’s Executive Board. The Prize, named after the Father of the Nation of Bangladesh, will reward outstanding initiatives that promote the engagement of young people in the creative economy with a prize of US$50,000 either to an individual or organization with recognized excellence in nurturing entrepreneurship among young people in the cultural and creative industries.

- **Approved draft law for the welfare of film artists in Bangladesh:** The Government of Bangladesh approved the draft of the Bangladesh Film Artists Welfare Trust Act 2020 in November 2020. The aim of the Act is to ensure the overall welfare of actors employed in the country’s film industry, including financial assistance to artists. A 13-member board of trustees is to be set up to administer the proposed Bangladesh Film Artists Welfare Trust, with the Information Minister as its chairman and a government-appointed Managing Director as its executive officer.

- **MoU with India for cultural exchange:** At the India-Bangladesh Virtual Summit in December 2020, an MoU was signed between the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Memorial Museum, Dhaka, Bangladesh and the National Museum, New Delhi, India. With 2021 marking 50 years of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh, the MoU stipulates to jointly organize several activities including regular exchanges of groups to promote culture.

- **Private organizations collaborating to support the crafts sector:** Private organizations such as the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB) have undertaken important documentation work, including creating a complete master list of weavers & sharing the same with the Bangladesh Handloom Board. The NCCB has also provided elaborated lists of artisans to Bondhu Shovar Tran, the relief committee of Bangladesh’s leading daily newspaper Protom Alo, and participated in their relief activity.

- **The Fashion Entrepreneurs Association of Bangladesh (FEAB)** has provided relief funds to artisans who are directly working with FEAB. Similarly, the **Fashion Design Council of Bangladesh (FDCB)** has been raising funds for award-winning artisans (such as conch, nakshi katha, terracotta, Tangail and woodcrafts), whose work has been recognized by the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB) or similar organizations in the past.

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“COVID-19 has caused us so many troubles, as well as it gave us some opportunities to promote digital environment.”

*By Mr. Md. Afzal Hossain Sarwar*

Policy Specialist (Educational Innovation)
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5. Recommendations for short-, medium, and long-term measures

A large number of recommendations for short-, medium, and long-term mitigation measures emerged from the impact assessment.

The following lists of proposed mitigation measures for Government (5.1) and Culture-based Organizations (5.2) are non-exhaustive proposed measures which shall serve as example actions that can be taken to address and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the culture and creative sector in Bangladesh.

5.1 Recommendations for Government

- Enhance legal protection of artists and cultural industries, including mechanisms for copyright protection and for providing professional status for artists and creative industries in Bangladesh
- Reinforce inter-ministerial cooperation to update and implement the existing cultural policy
- Set up financial measures to support artists and cultural industries during the pandemic
- Support the introduction of online and internationally recognized payment systems for artists to help artists to increase their income and to ensure their royalty
- Commission and promote Bangladeshi artworks and artists nationally and globally
- Create and support digital platforms for creative professionals to e-market their products in the absence of physical fairs
- Establish a sustainable data management system to support data collection and assessments including the Quadrennial Periodic Reporting (UNESCO’s 2005 Convention for the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions) of the culture and creative sector in Bangladesh

5.2 Recommendations for Culture-based Organizations

- Support awareness campaigns to recognize artists & cultural workers as professionals
- Advocate for the fair remuneration to artists & cultural professionals of their cultural goods & services offered online
- Support and fund mapping of the cultural and creative industries in Bangladesh (including sectoral mapping)
- Support sustainable information sharing network development between artists and cultural professionals and across sectors at 3 levels: within Bangladesh, across Asia, and internationally
- Support and fund innovative digital solutions for artists and cultural organizations

“A sustainable business model should be established to protect the cultural and creative industry of Bangladesh.”

By Mr. Fahimul Islam
Joint Secretary
Ministry of Cultural Affairs
- Support information sharing initiatives, such as incubators, to ensure updated information on policies, programmes & funds reaches all artists (e.g. those who are not tech savvy, senior artists etc.)
- Support, organize or co-organize capacity building workshops for artists on (a) copyright protection & intellectual property rights (b) online networking (c) digital tools & online efficiency, particularly for senior artists
- Support counselling services for cultural professionals
- Create an annual platform connecting all funding organizations that support arts, culture & heritage in Bangladesh to better coordinate efforts, and share information on new and transformed initiatives introduced, as well as lessons learnt from the pandemic

“Creative industry is an ecosystem. So I would like to request everyone to do a proper research and to create a market place for creating a digital environment in this sector.”

By Mr. Prito Reza
Photographer

“We need to talk to each other, sharing information. We have to share our failures and challenges, not only the success. We also have to develop programmes by listening to artists, to fund organizations to collaborate rather than compete.”

By Ms. Anupama Shekhar
Director of Culture Department
Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) Singapore
6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a stark toll on Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sectors. In Bangladesh, as in many other parts of the world, cultural and creative industries play important roles in the sustainable development and cohesion of society. They bring society together, shape values, provide learning opportunities, foster intercultural dialogue, as well as provide a source of income and livelihood to millions of people.

When analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the cultural and creative sector in Bangladesh, it is important to acknowledge that Bangladesh’s cultural and creative sector is extremely diverse, multifaceted, as well as comprising of a variety of sub-sectors.

The pandemic has in many ways renewed discussions on the medium and long-term sustainability of the cultural and creative sector in Bangladesh.

The shift to digital has created certain new opportunities for cultural professionals to continue creating, presenting, and collaborating despite restrictions on travel and physical gatherings. At the same time, it has exacerbated existing challenges such as fair remuneration and copyright protection.

Moving forward, as the pandemic continues to affect Bangladesh’s vulnerable cultural and creative sector, it is important to continue to innovate in the cultural and creative sector, to take concrete action to reach and support those artists and creative professionals who need support, and to call on artists and creative professionals as well as on culture-based organizations to contribute to the recovery process.

While this assessment indicates some areas and sectors, as well as ways in which artists and cultural professionals in Bangladesh are affected from the crisis and its economic ramifications, it will be important to acknowledge the recommendations and to take concrete steps in their implementation.

It is also significant to conduct a more in-depth assessment of the multi-dimensional and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on cultural and creative individuals and entities in Bangladesh.

Only by having a comprehensive and updated understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on cultural and creative individuals and entities will it be possible to take effective and efficient response action that can ensure their recovery and mid-to-long-term support, ensuring their sustainable development.

“Technological training, collaboration and cross-promotion should be arranged for artists to transform digitally.”

By Mr. Gausul Alam Shaon
Managing Partner & Creative Chief
Grey Bangladesh

“We do not have any other options without digital environment.”

By Mr. Jabeed Sultan Pias
Head of Digital Business
Prothom Alo