



**ArtsEkta**

**Consultation Response to Arts Council of Northern Ireland**

**Intercultural Arts Strategy 2011-2016**

## 1. ArtsEkta

1.1 ArtsEkta (Ekta means bonding/uniting in the Indian language) is a multi-award winning social enterprise that works to enhance the practice, understanding and appreciation of ethnic arts within an artistic, social and educational context. The organisation is dedicated to strengthening and deepening relationships between different cultures and communities through a series of exciting and inspiring arts-based programmes.

1.2 Conceptualised in early 2006 by a member of the local Indian community in Northern Ireland, ArtsEkta was born as result of local experiences on the ground. The founders believed it was important to form a progressive, enterprising group that works towards achieving integration and cohesion by promoting equality and an understanding of different minority cultures using the arts. They felt there was a strong need to develop the presence of local minority ethnic artists at a grassroots level and enable opportunities for their professional artistic development.

1.3 ArtsEkta's **vision** is to:

“To help shape an inclusive society that is respectful, embracing and reflective of the multiple cultural identities living in Northern Ireland”

1.4 ArtsEkta's **mission** is to:

“To promote and support multi-cultural arts and artists in the community by:

- Sharing the value of unique cultural experiences;
- Raising awareness and acceptance of different cultures through an innovative and creative programme of workshops, educational outreach and festivals.”

1.5 ArtsEkta's **core service delivery** includes:

- Regional outreach programme – Cultural Coach
- Specialised dance programme – South Asian Dance Academy
- Festivals – Belfast Mela, Diwali & Samhain and Festival of Colours
- Artistic Development
- Sectoral Development – leadership on Minority Ethnic Arts Forum and Stronger Together working groups.
- Commercial Services

1.6 For further information on the work and services of ArtsEkta please visit [www.artseкта.org.uk](http://www.artseкта.org.uk)

## 2. General Observations

- 2.1 ArtsEkta welcomes the development of an Intercultural Arts Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to see that the commitments outlined in *Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) Creative Connections 2007-2012* are being implemented and delivered with a sector led focus. Our experiences as an organisation working at the coalface with minority ethnic (ME) artists and communities re-iterate the need for such a strategy and we are delighted to be able to work with ACNI in this context.
- 2.2 ArtsEkta together with other organisations in the sector have been addressing arrange of the issues highlighted and it is therefore pleasing to finally have formal recognition of this by way of strategic policy. Examples of ArtsEkta's ground breaking work and approaches include the development of Belfast Mela and Cultural Coach projects; the recruitment and professional development of 30+ ethnic artists; the development of best practice models in ethnic arts through national partnerships with Creative Scotland, European Mela Network, The Nehru Centre (London) and Ulfah Arts (Bradford); the conceptualisation of the Minority Ethnic Arts Forum now managed by New Belfast Community Arts Initiative; and leadership in the ME sector through the 'Stronger Together' and 'Cultural Weave' initiatives. These achievements are already meeting the strategic themes outlined in the document.
- 2.3 The strategy is very well researched, articulated and confidently addresses the issues in access and participation in the arts by minority ethnic communities. ArtsEkta is pleased to note that that the development of this strategy has been consulted with minority ethnic arts organisations and practitioners and is in agreement with a majority of the views expressed. We particularly welcomed the informal focus group hosted by ArtsEkta on behalf of ACNI allowing for direct input from local minority ethnic artists. Establishing direct links between ME artists and ACNI through grassroots organisations is essential and must be continued. However, ArtsEkta is concerned that public awareness for consultation on this strategy has been too confined to the arts sector, and perhaps should have a broader remit to ensure the thoughts and views of the overall ME sector are represented accurately, particularly in the rural areas of Northern Ireland. Whilst we recognise that groups outside of the arts sector have been approached, this could have been more extensive. For example, ArtsEkta are one of the leading partners of the '*Stronger Together*' working group which consists of STEP, SEEDS, Foyle Multi-Cultural Forum, Chinese Welfare Association, Centre for Global Education and Ballymena Inter-Ethnic Forum. '*Stronger Together*' was developed with the view of creating a strong supportive network, supporting an integrated community development approach to tackling racism, promoting good relations, sharing & exchanging information, experience and knowledge towards achieving rights based interdependent integration. Conducting a round-the-table session with a group such as this would have collected the alternative views of those working extensively with ME urban and rural communities but not necessarily directly in the arts sector.

- 2.4 ArtsEkta believes that a key weakness of the overall document is that it sees the main role of increasing the infrastructure of ME arts to improve social integration and make “our” art more accessible to “them”. In other words, due prominence has been placed on increasing audience numbers rather than affording equal access and opportunity to artistic representation of culture based on ethnicity. ArtsEkta is concerned that there is no sense that ‘the minority arts’ are the external expression of internal individuals/collective cultures or that artists from ethnic backgrounds have equal entitlement to support their professional and artistic development with all other artists. Whilst developing audiences within ME communities is important this strategy seems to confuse both as the same issue.
- 2.5 ArtsEkta notes that the document repeatedly refers to addressing the ‘*creative and social needs of minority ethnic communities*’, however there is no mention of any economic considerations, the most important being employment created within the arts sector. ArtsEkta alone employs over 30 artists from the local ME communities. The contribution that ME arts can make to the NI economy should be embedded and highlighted throughout this strategy.
- 2.6 ArtsEkta welcomes the cross cutting nature of the document and demonstrable recognition of how the ACNI’s proposed strategic actions link to the Programme for Government (PfG) and overarching plans which influence public spend. However, to ensure full benefit realisation of this strategy joined-up thinking and a cross-sectoral and departmental approach must be ensured across the public, private, charity and academia sectors. ArtsEkta believes that these essential linkages are weak and not well highlighted in the proposed strategy.

### **3. Strategic Themes**

- 3.1 ArtsEkta are in agreement that all funding programmes must be more accessible to prospective ME applicants. For example, the level of success from ME artists applying to the SIAP is very disappointing. Focus must shift away from qualifications to the use of a fairer scoring system that places value on the art being practiced as opposed to the ‘academics’ behind it. It is important to note that many artists from ME communities consider their art as a norm of their culture rather than something that needs to be ‘professionally’ practiced. Accessibility must be enhanced at all levels and assessors must be equipped with the skills to deal with applications from ME artists.
- 3.2 ArtsEkta welcome the development of a new targeted funding programme for intercultural arts. It must be noted, however, that similar to above individuals and groups must be able to access this funding on a fair basis. For example, many existing small ME groups will not have the capacity to apply for and manage Peace III funding. In addition, ArtsEkta has concerns around the sustainability of Peace III funding as its main purpose is to

compliment existing activity through additionality and therefore should not be used as a source for a sustainable funding programme. A balanced, targeted and fair funding programme should be development that does not automatically exclude prospective applicants.

- 3.3 ArtsEkta support ACNI's commitment to enhance targeted communication to ME communities. A robust, relevant and personable communications strategy needs to be developed to achieve full benefit. ArtsEkta's view on this is explored later in the response.
- 3.4 ArtsEkta welcome new training initiatives proposed by ACNI and are keen to help consultatively develop programmes to ensure they are delivered to maximum benefit for ME artists.
- 3.5 ArtsEkta believes targeted programming by all arts organisations in the sector is essential. ArtsEkta recommends that this be embedded in funding criteria of all ACNI programmes particularly ASOP to ensure it is recognised. As part of this action resources should also be developed to assist arts organisations with developing audiences from ME communities. As an organisation that specifically works in the ME arts sector, ArtsEkta can assist with helping other arts organisations achieve programming quality and audience numbers through dynamic partnerships and collaboration.
- 3.6 ArtsEkta agrees that further research is needed around ME arts and supports ACNI's recommendations for joint studies with DCAL. Whilst this data capture is important, ArtsEkta recommends more rigorous conceptual thinking about what interculturalism and community cohesion mean in theory and in practice. There are major weaknesses in setting up a dynamic interchange between theoretical discussion and practice in this area, such that the lived reality of ME communities in Northern Ireland is still poorly understood and at times totally misjudged.
- 3.7 Whilst the actions associated with each of these themes are relevant and credible ArtsEkta feels that there are major shortcomings around proposed plans. The action plans fails to include any indication of human or financial resource allocations. Who is going to do all this work and how much is it going to cost? ArtsEkta appreciate the strategy is at its early stages of development however feel that these factors are essential to outline from the outset in order to clearly assess if resources are being maximised.

## 4. Barriers & Communication

- 4.1 ArtsEkta feel that throughout this strategy the barriers for ME communities and artists have been severely underestimated in a variety of different contexts. Whilst the barriers have been recognised there are no constructive actions for overcoming them. For example how will ACNI attempt to evade perception that prominent arts venues are only for middle to upper class indigenous communities? What are the proactive steps that give ME communities opportunities to attend arts events outside of their own communities? How will this be supported with funding and investment?
- 4.2 ArtsEkta believes that the use of Audiences NI as a catalyst for increasing participation in the arts from ME communities will only work if Audiences NI are proactive in working with ME arts organisations. There exists very little knowledge and understanding of this organisation in the ME sector and a strong perception that it only exists for the higher end, ASOP funded clients. Likewise it is widely thought that Audiences NI have very little understanding of the intricacies of ME communities and artists. These barriers must be overcome if Audiences NI is to play a part in the delivery of this strategy.
- 4.3 For work with ME artists ArtsEkta recommends that ACNI take a more personable approach to assist with their development. Developing robust relationships and utilising grassroots ME arts organisations as a platform to engage directly with local minority ethnic arts is essential. This success of this is evident in the consultation hosted by ArtsEkta to inform this strategy. As a result of the direct and personable contact with ACNI officers, the artists felt empowered, motivated and that their voice was being heard. ArtsEkta believes that this kind of visible support will be more effective web-based communication and will gain buy-in from ME communities.
- 4.4 ArtsEkta supports the steps outlined in the proposed communications strategy to raise awareness of intercultural arts throughout NI. ArtsEkta recommends that ACNI adopt a more proactive approach to collaborating with ME arts organisations to maximise visibility to ME communities and artists. For example, to date ACNI has not officially attended or represented (e.g. through promotional pitches/staff, branding presence etc) at any of ArtsEkta's festivals for which they have funded. The Belfast Mela alone has attracted over 70,000 visitors over five years with 42% from the local minority ethnic communities. It is essential that ACNI avail of these opportunities to enhance and underpin their communications strategy. It is also disappointing to note that there was no representation of intercultural arts projects in ACNI's latest annual review despite investment in a variety of projects including ArtsEkta's Cultural Coach and Belfast Mela programmes. ArtsEkta would welcome opportunities to collaborate with ACNI to raise the profile of intercultural arts regionally.

## **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 ArtsEkta feels that the creation of this strategy represents a huge milestone in the development of an infrastructure for minority ethnic arts in Northern Ireland, and with further review will be well placed to elevate Northern Ireland in line with practices elsewhere in the UK in this field.
- 5.2 Through this consultation response ArtsEkta has addressed some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the document. ArtsEkta would welcome the opportunity to expand our views to those involved in the preparation of the Intercultural Arts Strategy aswell as facilitate any further research that ACNI may wish to conduct where appropriate.