



END OF PROJECT REPORT

The ‘Art + Activism against Repression during the Covid-19 Crisis’

Introduction

Project Background

The Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), through a grant from the Open Society Foundations, set up a fund – Arctivists – to support activists and artists across the world responding to the outbreak of Covid-19 and its implications for human rights defenders, activism, and shrinking civic and political space. CAHR recognises that collaborative endeavours between activists and artists have the potential to provide innovative responses to the Covid-19 emergency, whether in a reactive, therapeutic or imaginative form. The ‘Art + Activism against Repression during the Covid-19 Crisis’ aimed at addressing one or more of the following three objectives:

- 1) Document, monitor and analyse events in real time.
- 2) Reflect on wellbeing of both the Arctivists and their communities/organisations.
- 3) Go beyond a reactive response to imagine new, alternative futures. This future-oriented work could assess how crisis and disruption open up new possibilities for creativity and innovation, as well as for regressive and repressive measures, and/or build on positive responses to the virus itself (local and global forms of solidarity).

Conservation Arts Malawi was accepted as of the ‘Arctivists’ for the project in April, 2020.

Background of ‘Arctivists’

Conservation Arts (Formerly: Conservation Music Malawi) is a registered, non-profit organization made up of activists and artists from a wide array of expertise, from musicians, poets, journalist, and human rights activists. The organization was established in 2017, with the primary focus on utilizing art to enhance sustainable livelihoods and human wellbeing. The organization has created content in the form of music, poems, short stories, animations and panel discussions. To reach out to targeted audience, it utilizes online music platforms, radios, television, print media, and musical festivals to share awareness messages and to lobby for action by different stakeholders. Some of the key issues that Conservation Arts has advocated for include floods preparedness, waste management, personal development, climate action and wildlife protection. In the wake of COVID-19, government responses and its impacts, Conservation Arts felt the obligation to engage people through community journalism and mental wellbeing initiatives. The two initiatives contribute to objective 1 and 2 of the ‘Arctivist’ call for funding. The COVID 19 pandemic had hit Malawi when there was already political unrest due to nullification of presidential elections that took place in May, 2019, pending 21 days lockdown and a lot of conflicting narratives about the disease and its impacts on society.

Project Justification



In addition to the impact of COVID 19 in terms of infections and deaths, the broader population was and still is in despair and anxiety due to both the uncertainty of what the future holds as well as change of lifestyle to comply with government measures. For instance, some of the measures set forth by the government of Malawi include:

- Suspending all central markets and movement restrictions affecting income generation on the part of sellers and difficulty in accessing food and other necessities on the part of consumers. This is especially worrying for Malawians as majority of them are in the informal sector characterized by ‘hand to mouth’ upkeep tendencies.
- Suspending all entertainment, cultural and sporting activities, and restrictions on public transport.
- All formal sectors working from home or not working at all, an unplanned adjustment with impacts on daily routine, mental health, gender relations and domestic relations.

Due to the volatility of the situation in Malawi, COVID-19 narratives were prone to distortion, held back or misrepresented to fit and benefit some sectors of the society.

Project Activities

The project activities aimed at amplifying activism to facilitate conveyance of key messages and information, compensating for the lack or manipulation of official narratives through use of blog posts and artistic platforms.

Community Journalism: The aim of community journalism was to document, monitor and analyse events in real time. Community volunteers provided stories, opinions and community activities to form basis for blogs posts, songs, poems and short stories.

Mental Wellbeing through Arts: The aim of this initiative is to reflect on wellbeing of the artists, activists and the communities being served. By keeping artists and activists engaged in creative work, the initiative will help the artists and activists to positively reframe while at the same time providing entertainment and hope to thousands of people that are in despair due to COVID-19.

Project Outputs

- (1) *Brief paragraph outlining the project for the Human Rights Defender Hub website (on signing the contract).*

Responding to COVID-19, Conservation Arts Malawi will implement an ‘Arctivists’ project through community journalism and mental wellbeing initiatives. The objectives of the project are to document, monitor and analyse COVID-19 events in real time as well as to reflect on wellbeing of the artists, activists and the communities we serve. By keeping artists and activists engaged in creative work, the initiative will help the artists and activists to positively reframe while at the same time providing information, entertainment and hope to thousands of people that are in despair due to COVID-19. The initiative will amplify activism and facilitate



conveyance of key messages and information, compensating for the lack of narratives or manipulation of realities. This will involve engaging artist in composing songs, poems and stories to be shared through print and online platforms.

(2) *Articles published every two weeks (May-September 2020)*

Summary of articles published

Article/link	Author/Contributor	Comments
My COVID Routine	Hezrone Tunga'nde	A semi-fictional description of the dilemma associated with the working-from-home phenomena
Hopes for the best after COVID-19	Harold Kapindu and Justice Chiponda	An exploration on how the audio-visual sector was/is affected by COVID-19
COVID-19 Overshadows Environmental Arts	Harold Kapindu	COVID-19 effects on environmental awareness and how conservation artists ventured into other equally important activism for earth
The Social Costs for Managing COVID-19	Gome Jenda and Elias Gaveta	Exploring the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic
COVID Stories Gallery	Elias Gaveta	Mixed reactions, opinions and stories that made headlines regarding COVID-19 impacts and responses
Who is taking care of artists?	Elias Gaveta	While other sectors like football had a special fund to support players, performing artists who were equally affected were asking the question
COVID-19 pandemic coincides with teen pregnancy-demic	Arthur Chibwana and Elias Gaveta	Counting the figures; COVID infections, recoveries and death versus teenage pregnancies across Malawi due to closure of schools, staying at home etc.
The Debate on Re-opening Schools	Arthur Chibwana	After about six months of school closure, people started expressing concerns and providing options to have learners back at school
#Mask_up_meets #Mask4allMalawi	Harold Kapindu	The mandatory requirement of wearing masks in public was followed by Mask4AllMalawi campaign which drew mixed reactions
Girls Peer Support Club Against COVID	Santy Emmet	While concerns about teenage pregnancies grew, a female artist took an interesting initiative
Drawing the picture : COVID impacts	Mawofozi	A picture is worth a thousand words. A description of how closure of schools affected rural primary school learners in Malawi



Other Publications

In addition to the blog posts, other articles were also published through other platforms as below.

Article/link	Publisher	Author
Resumption of Live Music attracts mixed reactions	Nyasa Times	Harold Kapindu
What is this? COVID poem	265entmw	Harold Kapindu
Commemorating world environment day during COVID	265entmw	Harold Kapindu
Alone with Everyone	Conservation Arts Newsletter (attached)	Lucent Shaba
Conservation Arts in Arctivism	The Vessels Magazine (attached)	Kondwani Maskin

(3) *Production of songs, poems and stories (30 September 2020)*

Below is a description of the audio productions;

Title/link	Artist/s	Comments
Corona ft Zinja	Tigris	A description of how artist were affected by the pandemic
What is happening?	Zinja and Ed	Spoken word aiming at demystifying issues around corona virus and encouraging prevention
Chikuchitika ndi chani?	Zinja and Ed	The vernacular language (Chichewa) version of what is happening
United against Covid	Binge	A call for everyone to take part in prevention, awareness and supporting those that are more vulnerable
Mask yanga ili kuti?	Zinja	A story about how forgetting a mask or losing it becomes an inconvenience to get services from public offices, shops etc.
Tipewe Covid-19	Santy	Describing transmission and prevention practices as advised by health experts
When I look around	Binge	A story on the proposed solutions to the increase of teenage pregnancies

Conclusion



The project inspired artist to get engaged and achieved its intended objectives of documenting, monitoring and analysing events in real time. Most of all it kept the artist engaged not only with themselves but also with the communities. To think of impact, conservation arts received requests from more artists expressing interest to be part. Since the COVID-19 situation is still volatile and dynamic, new issues keep coming up as situations evolve. Local TV and radio stations aired the video and audio productions reaching more people that have limited or no access to social media platforms.