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The Role of Arts in Health Policy Advocacy

Nyakairu Doreen G.

Faculty of Science and Technology Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the critical role that the arts play in health policy advocacy, focusing on how artistic expression improves communication, encourages emotional engagement, and boosts public health programs. Health policy advocates can use artistic disciplines such as visual arts, theatre, and dance to engage with various audiences, highlight serious health challenges, and catalyse societal change. The arts provide a unique platform for marginalised people to express their health experiences, bridging the divide between public health data and community awareness. This paper examines successful case studies and discusses the obstacles to incorporating artists into health policy advocacy, specifically issues about tokenism and budget restrictions. Finally, this interdisciplinary approach shows how art can influence health policy and public perception.

Keywords: Arts in health, Health policy advocacy, Creative expression, Public health communication, Marginalized voices.

INTRODUCTION

Arts play a central and critical role in health policy advocacy. An increasing number of healthcare institutions and organizations are recognizing the potential of creative expression and the arts now more than ever and are redefining the scope of their art programs to effect change, including the body's response to healing. Art, for change, can bring together multiple voices and perspectives on an issue by utilizing one's sense of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell. Scientific studies support what art, for change, has demonstrated since its inception; creative expression can powerfully influence people to change their direction, opinions—even selves! Art can meld with a viewer's individual experiences and emotions, creating a moment of mystic connection [1, 2]. The history of art and politics is as long as the history of man. Art is used to portray individualist or social idealist struggles and aid in the resistance against the very revolutions that started over them. Today's use of arts in advocacy also locates its framework within cultural arts, healing arts, arts rehabilitation, community work, and art-as-experience. With this, the tools of arts are added to traditional forms of advocacy to challenge human rights, health, and policy beliefs and to intertwine new forms of expression with old, familiar tools of health change. As a growing adolescent program at the intersection of art, mental health, and policy, this new ideology and methodology are wholly embraced as a hopeful way to explain and resist at the discourse level the instances of interlinked global epidemics. Indeed, the arts are not only center stage in advocating for access to the arts, but they have also been identified as a critical tool to bring about social and political change [3, 4].

The Intersection of Arts and Health Policy Advocacy

Arts and health policy advocacy connect through many channels. At its simplest interpretation, art can raise awareness about an issue, including public health topics. Artistry can create emotional resonance, mobilize communities, illuminate issues, and suggest directions to community decision-makers. The personal stories of artists themselves also help clarify the physical and emotional burdens of disease and the joys of recovery. Advocates often draw on such narratives to humanize health issues. The arts thus bridge the headiness of health professionals with the hearts of everyday people [5, 6]. A more complex but influential interpretation of this intersection of health and art is that the arts can bring different sets

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of people and their varied perspectives to the same dialogue table. They can help people understand the different points of view of others. They can teach laypeople to respect and rely upon scientific data. They can remind health professionals of the value of listening to individual patient stories. Consequently, they provide an interstice between conflicting ideologies, inviting respectful dialogue among those who possess different degrees of cultural and scientific capital. Artists, scientists, and advocates build surrogacy, shaping citizen desires, values, and ideologies; creating the will to consider the issue in the first place. Our emotional and cultural values, when dramatized or toyed with artistically, shape our thinking about research. Policymakers and communities may become interested in and invest in research with intrinsic curiosity due to artistic craftsmanship and the beauty of a particular message. Successful examples include visual arts, playwriting, dance, and mixed media [7, 8]. An important aspect of the intersection of the arts and health concerns is the importance of the beautiful, moving, and crafted story. Thus, this part of our analysis addresses the intersections of art and health rather than strictly health policy projects where artists work with community members and with health professionals [9, 10].

The Benefits of Using Arts in Health Policy Advocacy

Given both their capacity to connect emotionally and their wide-ranging ability to reach numerous and diverse audiences, the arts provide dynamic and impactful resources for public health policymakers and advocates. By making complex, socially determined health issues more relatable and understandable, the arts offer the opportunity to foster and inspire engagement and action. Their emotive and dynamic capacities make the arts crucial to reaching polite, disengaged, and apathetic publics, particularly on issues where general support is required if policy change is to be driven. Critically, the use of the arts in public health policy advocacy can substantially enhance opportunities for communication with and meaningful input from individuals and groups who are marginalized or silenced. Carefully commissioned and constructed activities can be used to empower and give marginalized voices a platform to speak, maximizing opportunities for practitioners to learn about, and policymakers to consider, the lived experience of health [11, 1]. The arts provide an emotive and memorable means to create and seed public health messages that can remain in the consciousness of communities and the public long past the moment of creation; as such, they extend the “life cycle” of public health policy campaigns. The scalability and transferability of artistic assets provide unique opportunities for wider public health sector communication. They appeal to and can be co-created with non-arts partner networks, providing community development and public health professionals the opportunity to create powerful assets to empower their campaigns, programs, or initiatives. Indeed, given that artistic assets are typically co-created by and feature relevant target audience groups, they effectively model representation. This could be of great significance for communities of public health interest that are typically overlooked by population health solutions and development agendas, such as those constituent members of marginalized and minority populations in countries with exclusionary migrant health policies [12, 1].

Case Studies of Successful Arts-Based Health Policy Advocacy Campaigns

Case Study 1. Dance and Transnational Neuropathological Research as Case Studies to Connect Choreography with Policy Advocacy in Global Health introduces research conducted by the Community Engagement and Policy work package of a funded project. This highly interdisciplinary project explores new possibilities for extending the field of global public health in the treatment, control, and eradication of kala-azar in South Asia, a devastating tropical disease that kills 20,000 to 50,000 people each year. Each of the activities discussed in this paper formed part of an arts and health public engagement programme [13, 14]. Case Study 2. Performing the Evidence of Mental Distress. The High Stakes of Austerity project draws on research led across the departments of English and Creative Writing and Social Statistics, under the auspices of an interdisciplinary centre, which uses comedy, poetry, drama, and digital storytelling workshops, as well as stand-up comedy events, to challenge stigmatized representations of mental health and to make the case that everyone has mental health. All of the activities were funded by internal strategic engagement funding [15, 16].

Challenges And Limitations of Incorporating Arts in Health Policy Advocacy

Despite the range of benefits that come from the inclusion of arts in health, there are potential challenges and limitations of incorporating arts into health policy advocacy. Some more cynical voices have suggested that this inclusion can tend toward tokenism, where arts are co-opted to serve the requirements of a health sector trying to talk more about empowerment, community, and well-being without really supporting and resourcing the arts for their potential. Practically, another limitation to the use of arts in health policy advocacy is that arts projects are often time and resource-intensive, and there is established competition for funding. The complexity of arts and the fact that many people in the health

sector may lack knowledge about what happens or how it can happen may also deter those in the health field from seeking such a partnership. Another potential limitation of using arts in policy advocacy is the need to measure the effectiveness of these projects for funding proposals and applications—which is far from an easy task. Metrics like these can also essentialize the arts as an instrument for change, rather than a form and practice that can generate and share diverse values about human experience [17, 18, 19]. When communities tell their health stories through artistic expression, there is always a risk that the message can be oversimplified, potentially risking tokenism and loss of understanding to a mass audience who is presumed not to have an interest in, or understanding of, more complex and harder messages. An important element in integrating the arts into policy advocacy is the care and strategies by which 'artistic' works are then represented through public platforms. The messages that are garnered from public health and research data can dominate, attract funding, and shape the cultural response. This can reflect the power dynamics of funding sources. While we argue for the instrumental use of the arts in health promotion and research, it is important to maintain a balanced perspective by acknowledging the context of these claims and the need, to be honest, thorough, and open in appraising and developing future arts initiatives that bridge the divide between health research and the wider community.

CONCLUSION

The arts serve as a powerful tool in health policy advocacy, offering an emotionally resonant, accessible, and dynamic way to address public health challenges. By engaging with diverse populations and elevating marginalized voices, artistic initiatives contribute to more inclusive and impactful health policies. However, while arts-based advocacy presents substantial benefits, challenges like tokenism, funding competition, and measuring impact remain. Despite these obstacles, the fusion of artistic expression with health advocacy holds immense potential to drive positive social and political change, fostering a more inclusive and engaged approach to public health.

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