

# Recalibrating the Compass: New Approaches to Asia-Europe Cultural Relations



Final report and future orientations

Recalibrating the Compass:  
New Approaches to Asia-Europe  
Cultural Relations.

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Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

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New Approaches to Asia-Europe Cultural Relations

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# Preface

To mark ASEF's 25th anniversary in 2022, the Culture Department launched the consultation process *Recalibrating the Compass: What Future for Asia-Europe Cultural Relations?* to investigate the current scene in Asia-Europe cultural relations and discuss with like-minded organisations possible strategies for a post-pandemic recovery. The consultation was developed over a period of 8 months and 5 thematic closed-door roundtables, inviting over 60 amongst ASEF stakeholders, partners, and friends from over 40 countries, both from the public and independent arts sectors.

I am delighted to present today the final report of this roundtable series, titled *Recalibrating the Compass: New Approaches to Asia-Europe Cultural Relations*. Authored by cultural policy expert Jordi Baltà Portolés, who co-designed the roundtables and wrote the individual reports, this publication presents the key findings and recommendations that emerged from the 5 roundtables and the public forum<sup>1</sup> organised as the closing event of the series, in February 2023.

The report reveals several challenges of the cultural sector and for the development of cultural relations. While inequalities within the sector in the 2 regions were already manifest before the global pandemic, these have further accelerated as a result of the pandemic. The increased digital divide for professionals in the arts and their lack of access to training opportunities and networking; the restrictions to cultural mobility, the impact of the climate crisis on the cultural sector and issues related to colonial and post-colonial narratives are some of the topics discussed through the consultation process and reflected in this report. In addition to identifying key issues in developing cultural relations, the report aims also to provide us with a set of recommendations to guide our future orientations. Overall, what clearly emerged from this report, is the essential “transversal” role that culture plays in shaping sustainable development policies and projects and in fostering new narratives through creative practices.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all the people that have taken the time to participate in this consultation process. Your generous contributions have helped us shape this report, which we hope will help all of us navigate the current complex geopolitical environment and continue to develop healthy and diverse cultural relations between Asia and Europe.

Valentina RICCARDI  
Director, Culture Department, ASEF  
Singapore, June 2023

<sup>1</sup> Asia-Europe Cultural Relations: A look ahead, 9 February 2023 Recording:  
<https://culture360.asef.org/news-events/asia-europe-cultural-relations-a-look-ahead-recording/>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO 2022 Global Report, Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity—Addressing culture as a global public good, pg.211:  
<https://en.unesco.org/creativity/publications/2022-global-report-reshaping-policies-creativity>

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## Background

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), established in 1997, is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation which brings together the people of Asia and Europe to address common global challenges, by advancing mutual understanding and collaboration between both regions and acting as an interface between civil society and governments. One of its programme departments is devoted to culture, and serves to promote cultural cooperation, by connecting artists, cultural professionals, arts organisations, public institutions, networks and museums in Asia and Europe.



On the occasion of its 25th anniversary, in 2022, ASEF organised a series of online roundtables entitled *Recalibrating the Compass: What Future for Asia-Europe Cultural Relations?*. The series aimed to examine **current challenges in the field of cultural relations**, including those emerging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify new, more relevant and resilient forms of support for Asia-Europe cultural collaboration. It took as a starting point ASEF's work in this field over 25 years, but it also aimed to address current issues including the **status of the artist, the climate crisis, ethics and sustainability in cultural practices, and the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism**.

In this context, 5 closed-door, online thematic roundtables were held between May and November 2022. 2 additional public online events were organised addressing complementary topics, including a [Side Event on 'Rethinking Cultural Cooperation in Times of Global Crisis'](#) held in the framework of the UNESCO Mondiacult conference in September; and a closing [Public Forum in February 2023](#), which took stock of the issues addressed throughout the series and discussed future priorities.

Drawing on the contributions made throughout the series, and an identification of broader themes which shape cultural relations today, this final report summarises the key issues identified and presents guidance for future work in the field of Asia-Europe cultural relations. While commissioned by ASEF, it should be of interest to other stakeholders active in this area, whether or not they have taken part in the roundtable series.

## Recalibrating the Compass: Emerging issues in Asia-Europe Cultural Relations



### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURAL RELATIONS?

The field of international cultural relations includes several concepts which, despite sharing some features, can also be distinguished, including cultural diplomacy (as well as public diplomacy and related concepts, such as soft power), cultural cooperation, and cultural relations.

The *Recalibrating the Compass* series focused particularly on 'cultural relations', a concept which is gaining international attention in recent years. Cultural relations aim to foster dialogue, mutual trust and understanding between cultures. They are, therefore, intrinsically different from soft power, which primarily aims to exert power through economic and cultural influence. Cultural relations have been defined as 'reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society'.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the outcomes of cultural relations can be better connectivity, mutual understanding, stronger relationships, and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures.

CULTURAL RELATIONS AIM TO FOSTER DIALOGUE, MUTUAL TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN CULTURES.



This understanding of cultural relations sits well with the **multilateral, cross-regional context** which defines ASEF's scope of action, emphasising the potential for mutual understanding and cross-cultural enrichment generated by activities such as artistic collaborations, cultural networking, peer-learning and joint reflection processes, in areas such as culture, education and other fields in which both governments and civil society organisations intervene. Indeed, many agents, including national and local governments, arts councils, regional and international organisations, NGOs, universities, professional networks and associations as well as individuals, contribute to cultural relations. Cultural relations are therefore closely connected to the affirmation of an ecosystem of diverse agents, and the recognition of and support for cultural diversity.

THE EMPHASIS OF CULTURAL RELATIONS LIES ON BALANCED CULTURAL EXCHANGES ACROSS BORDERS

The **similarities and differences between cultural diplomacy and cultural relations** are not always easy to establish. While some activities and organisations may be classified as responding both to cultural relations and to cultural (or public) diplomacy, in general the emphasis of cultural relations lies on balanced cultural exchanges across borders (rather than having the interests of one country as an aim, as would be the case in diplomacy and soft power). This implies that, rather than giving priority to the presentation of cultural expressions from a country to a foreign audience, cultural relations will often look for the cultural elements that are shared across cultures or those that can enable mutual learning, or seek to foster the emergence of new cultural expressions as a result of cross-border collaborations. Frequently, cultural relations are also concerned with the long-term, including by aiming to build trust and develop long-lasting relations between societies, while cultural diplomacy activities may often be concerned with shorter-term goals.

<sup>1</sup> Gillespie, M. et al. (2018). Cultural Value. Cultural Relations in Societies in Transition. A Literature Review. London: British Council, quoted in ICR Research (2022). Soft power and cultural relations. A comparative analysis. London: British Council. Available at <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/policy-reports/soft-power-cultural-relations-comparative-analysis>



## CURRENT CONCERNS AND ISSUES FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS IN THE ASIA-EUROPE CONTEXT

The *Recalibrating the Compass* series has allowed to identify some of the issues that shape cultural relations in the Asia-Europe context at present, and that could deserve attention in future agendas. This section summarises the main concerns and themes identified, connecting them with global trends in cultural relations and identifying some implications for the future.



### a) A problematic context, accelerated by COVID-19

Cultural and creative ecosystems across Asia and Europe are, despite their differences, frequently affected by similar structural problems which hinder the



sustainability of professionals and organisations active in these fields: precarious working conditions, lack of continued funding, fragmented cultural ecosystems, a digital divide which limits the opportunities to use technology, gender inequality, etc. While several of these factors are common to other sectors and areas of activity, they are often experienced acutely in cultural and creative fields. Furthermore, there are other contextual issues which lead to imbalances in cross-border cultural relations, including **unequal economic resources across countries, restrictions to international mobility, inequalities in linguistic skills and access to information, etc.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many of these weaknesses more evident, by limiting the income sources and threatening the business models of cultural organisations and venues, reducing the inflow of international tourism to cultural heritage sites, preventing access to international networking opportunities (other than in digital formats), and heightening the awareness of the climate crisis. It has also provoked some shifts which have a negative impact on cultural relations, such as an increasing focus of policy agendas and social debates on domestic affairs, at the expense of international engagement, which was frequently noted in the online roundtable series.

## RENEWED AWARENESS OF, AND WORK, AROUND INCLUSIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND THE SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED GOALS OF MANY CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS



This sense of crisis underpins several of the issues presented in the following pages. At the same time, debates have also made evident that there are emerging opportunities, as illustrated by the **increase in cross-border online exchange** (of which *Recalibrating the Compass* was an illustrative example), and the renewed awareness of, and work, around inclusive cultural activities and the social and community-oriented goals of many cultural organisations. These issues will also be addressed in the following sections.



### b) Towards more inclusive and responsible cultural activities

Reflections on the **ethics of cultural work**, and how to translate stated values into effective practices, are increasingly central in debates around cultural management and cultural policy. Given that access and cultural diversity are frequently central to organisations' mission statements, these should, for instance, be particularly attentive to the conditions that enable or hinder cultural participation among specific groups (e.g. those living in poverty, Indigenous populations, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities), consider labour conditions in the cultural sector, and address cases of harassment and discrimination. **Some participants in the *Recalibrating the Compass* debate series suggested that cultural organisations should adopt a rights-based approach as a guiding principle in their practices.** More broadly, cultural organisations could also consider ways to be more diverse and inclusive internally.

Since these are common, widespread concerns, there are many organisations that are already active in addressing discrimination, contributing to access and inclusion, and considering their own practices in a rights-based perspectives, and an increasing number of initiatives providing guidance in this field (e.g. handbooks, declarations, training course, etc.). They could provide the basis for fostering peer-learning and enhancing information and knowledge in these areas, as one of the fields in which organisations like ASEF could increasingly be active.



### c) Reflecting fairness in international collaboration

The aforementioned ethical considerations have implications both at the level of individual cultural organisations, as outlined above, and in the field of international cultural relations. Indeed, as the Asia-Europe context shows, cultural exchange is frequently framed by colonial legacies, geostrategic interests, and economic inequalities across societies. More specifically, cultural expressions and heritage from Europe and, particularly, from the largest countries in the continent, are generally more visible than those from Asia, and there are more opportunities for cultural mobility within Europe and from Europe to Asia, than within Asia and from Asia to Europe. During the roundtable series, **some participants also warned that an Asian perspective is frequently lacking in documents on cultural relations and diplomacy.**



Other specific implications of these reflections include the need for museums and heritage institutions to be more transparent about the origins of their collections (and consider restitution measures where applicable) and to ensure that cultural elements from minorities and disadvantaged groups are dealt with and presented in an ethical way, avoiding the risk of cultural appropriation.

The need to consider these imbalances and revise patterns in cross-regional relations echoes a range of contributions that, in the last few years, have called for more fair international cultural collaboration

(see e.g. [IETM](#) and [DutchCulture's work on fair cultural cooperation](#); EUNIC's work on [fair collaboration in cultural relations](#); Salzburg Global Seminar's [Statement on the Future of Cultural Diplomacy](#); and ASEAN's [Culture of Prevention approach](#)).

Therefore, since knowledge on how to transform practices already exists, the priority could be now on making such practices effective. This could involve focusing on opportunities for balanced exchanges as well as on training and capacity development, in order to address weaknesses in local and national infrastructures and capacities which prevent the development of more balanced collaboration.



### d) The increasing relevance of global agendas

As in other areas of activity, cultural work, including that which takes place at the international level, is increasingly framed by global agendas, including the

[UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

and similar priorities existing at regional and national level. This often leads cultural practitioners and organisations to connect their activities to the achievement of economic, social and environmental goals, without neglecting the attention to creativity, diversity, heritage and other areas which are central to artistic and cultural work.

While the SDGs and related agendas may be seen as restricting the autonomy of cultural organisations to pursue their own goals, many actors in cultural and creative sectors are actively, genuinely engaged in fostering sustainable development in its different dimensions, and convinced of the centrality of cultural work in order to build more sustainable societies and contribute to a healthier planet. This is illustrated by cultural projects and policies which contribute to reducing inequalities through community empowerment (such as [SAKA](#), an alliance of artists and cultural workers that collaborates with agricultural workers in the Philippines; and [Tuyang](#), a community-led arts management company representing and working with Indigenous people across Malaysian Borneo), inclusive economic development through employment creation (as demonstrated by how several EU Member States have identified [cultural heritage and other cultural and creative sectors as an investment priority](#) within the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility), raising awareness about climate change through creative initiatives (e.g. the National Museum of Singapore's [Rooting for Change—Artistic Responses to Climate Change and Sustainability programme](#); and the [Future Materials Bank](#) of the Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands), the sustainable use of marine and terrestrial ecosystems through traditional knowledge and intangible cultural heritage practices (as in the case of [Struggles for Sovereignty](#), an Indonesian collective platform that connects art, food, farming, land rights, and Indigenous and ecological activism; and the [Bulandshahr Legacy](#) project in Uttar Pradesh, India, which invites cultural practitioners to help communities reappropriate

spaces in valuable natural areas which have been threatened by human action), and making cities and human settlements inclusive by fostering accessible cultural practices (as illustrated by many of the good practices included in the [Obs database of the UCLG Committee on Culture](#)).

The fact that these agendas are global also provides a common ground on which cross-regional cultural relations can develop. In this respect, there is potential to see the SDGs as a common framework to establish international cultural collaborations, as well as awareness-raising, advocacy and capacity-building on how cultural activities can contribute to making societies more sustainable and resilient.



#### e) The importance of facilitating encounters between diverse groups

Cultural organisations, and the activities they plan and implement, have the potential to enable encounters and mutual recognition between groups that would not meet otherwise – e.g. between the young and the old, majority and minority ethnic, linguistic or religious groups, those living in rural and in urban areas or in different neighbourhoods, long-term residents and recent arrivals, etc. This ability gains relevance in fragmented societies and in a context where fear often prevails in approaching those who are different, something that has become even more acute in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the *Recalibrating the Compass* roundtable series, several examples of how local communities are brought together through their joint participation in creative projects (such as [Ci.CLO](#), a platform for artistic research, production and intervention in the medium of photography based in Portugal, which facilitates 'immersive' experiences connecting artists and families in rural areas) or the presentation and exchange of their diverse heritages (as in the case of the [Textile Culture Net](#), a network connecting textile museums and art institutions in several countries of Asia and Europe; '[Sound of the Soul](#)', a sound art exhibition presented in Bangkok which allowed urban audiences to become familiar with the reality of marginalised ethnic groups in Thailand; or the [Chester Beatty Library](#), in Dublin, which presents extensive collections from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia and is very active in intercultural learning activities) were discussed.



The facilitation of encounters is relevant both inside communities and at the regional or international level. Indeed, cultural relations between Asia and Europe are one important way in which stories about the other can be presented, helping to discover both that which is singular about countries and cultures and that which is shared or more similar than initial stereotypes would suggest. Cultural organisations active in bilateral and multilateral contexts or which present works coming from other countries, regional and international networks, and artists and culture professionals engaging in international residencies or collaborative projects have a key role to play in this respect.

The facilitation of such encounters relies on **suitable processes of mediation and interpretation, ranging from linguistic translation**, where necessary, to the ability to reach out to individuals and communities that may not feel attracted to cultural activities at first sight. Cultural professionals need to develop the skills necessary to generate comfortable, inviting spaces, be open to and consult communities, manage the tensions that may arise when diverse groups are placed together in a room, provide accessible information which helps to contextualise complex stories and expressions, and facilitate active, positive engagement by those who are less experienced in cultural activities. Collaboration with other organisations (e.g. community groups, universities, media, etc.) can be a useful step in this respect. Furthermore, organisations may need capacity-building in mediation skills, something to which organisations like ASEF, given their unique position across regions, can contribute.



REACH OUT TO INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES THAT MAY NOT FEEL ATTRACTED TO CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AT FIRST SIGHT



#### f) Towards more meaningful international exchange

The COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns and restrictions to international mobility it generated, has given an increasing centrality to online exchanges, including video-conferencing and other forms of technology-enabled interactions. Technology broadens the opportunities to engage in international collaborations and can lead to questioning whether the forms of mobility or 'hypermobility' that have prevailed in the past, at least for those who could afford to be mobile or were forced into it, remain relevant.

UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES SHOULD INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY BE REPLACED OR COMPLEMENTED BY VIRTUAL EXCHANGES?

At the same time, physical encounters remain important in many contexts—in order to broaden professional opportunities, build trust among peers, co-design and co-develop projects, etc. There emerge here two important issues. On the one hand, the need to establish criteria that allow to determine when international mobility is relevant (and when it can be replaced or complemented with online exchanges) and for whom (that is, whether it should only be a few people who travel, or rather priority should be given to those who have had less opportunities to do so, or those who fulfil other conditions). On the other hand, the need to make international mobility, when it happens, more rewarding and enriching—that is, to seek ways to ensure that travel contributes to good-quality encounters and dialogue, and to 'slow', in-depth, meaningful exchange, the type of interaction that cannot easily be replaced with digital interaction. This relates to the acknowledgment that quality time is needed in order to understand and connect with foreign contexts, as well

as to develop conversations and trust with others. Furthermore, slower mobility (including that which happens through rail and sustainable forms of transport, where they are available, and which allows several days or weeks at the destination) also makes sense from the perspective of sustainability.

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS NEEDED TO ENSURE DEPTH AND QUALITY OF EXCHANGES WHEN TRAVELLING INTERNATIONALLY?

Asia-Europe cultural relations need meaningful mobility, in the form of travel to access training and learning opportunities, to develop joint projects, to explore diverse realities, etc. It is necessary to complement such exchanges with good-quality digital interaction that opens other opportunities and complements physical encounters. In addition to individual mobility, meaningful collaboration is also enabled by formal and informal networks, which exist in many cultural sectors. Over the last few decades, cross-national cultural networks have been instrumental to facilitate mutual knowledge and a richer cultural landscape across Europe and have increasingly engaged in connections between Asia and Europe, as well as, to a lesser extent, across Asia. These remain, however, areas that will require further development in the years to come.



**g) Increasing awareness of the implications of climate change**

As some of the earlier sections have shown, reflections on climate change are cross-cutting in debates on arts management, cultural policy and cultural relations today, as the debates of *Recalibrating the Compass* have shown. This is an all-encompassing theme, which affects practices within cultural organisations (e.g. in the choice of themes addressed or works commissioned or presented, the search of ways to reduce carbon emissions and integrate circular economy principles in day-to-day operations, etc.), their relations with communities (e.g. environmental awareness-raising or educational activities through the arts and culture, alliances with environmental groups, activists or Indigenous people, etc.) and forms of international engagement (e.g. by considering ways of reducing the environmental impacts of travel). Professionals and organisations in the cultural and creative sectors are increasingly revising their practices in these fields to make them more sustainable and adapted to the climate crisis.

ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL WORK CAN CONTRIBUTE TO CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF, COMMUNITIES' ASPIRATIONS AND VALUES, FOSTERING MORE BALANCED, SUSTAINABLE WAYS OF LIFE THAT ARE ALIGNED WITH THE CHANGES GENERATED BY THE CLIMATE CRISIS

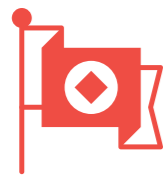
While many sustainable practices may be similar to those that could be adopted by organisations in other sectors, it is also important to stress that the work of cultural professionals and organisations have some distinctive elements. For instance, artistic and cultural work can contribute to critical reflections on, and the transformation of, communities' aspirations and values, fostering more balanced, sustainable ways of life that are aligned with the changes generated by the climate crisis—as illustrated by performing and visual arts works, films and audiovisual productions, literature, etc. that address the natural environment or the impact of climate change on societies and the planet. Likewise, traditional knowledge and other elements in intangible cultural heritage, and the communities and heritage organisations (e.g. museums, archives, etc.) that preserve and disseminate them, can provide useful approaches to sustainable relationships with the environment. It is important to highlight this specific contribution of culture in addressing climate change.

The diverse realities found across the Asia-Europe space mean that climate change is experienced in very different ways, and the ability to make choices in this field is also very unequal—more sustainable energy or transport options are not easily available in some countries and regions, for instance. The notion of 'climate justice', which entails acknowledging that the burden of responsibility to adapt to climate change should not be placed unfairly on the shoulders of those who are more disadvantaged, should be central in this respect. In terms of cultural relations, this could also mean ensuring that travel opportunities are not restricted unfairly for artists and culture professionals from disadvantaged regions and contexts, in such a way that their ability to develop a professional career is unreasonably curtailed.



## FUTURE ORIENTATIONS FOR ASIA-EUROPE CULTURAL RELATIONS

Drawing from the identification of issues that shape the Asia-Europe cultural landscape nowadays, this closing section identifies 4 priority areas to support cultural relations in this space in the near future. While many of the ideas presented hereafter will be particularly relevant for ASEF's work, other stakeholders active in this field could also find useful guidance here.



### 1) Pilot projects illustrating fairer cultural relations and meaningful exchanges

As outlined in the previous section, recent years have witnessed many reflections on how to make cultural relations fairer and more balanced, recognising the value of diverse cultures and addressing historical and structural inequalities to enable balanced dialogue. With a wide range of principles and guidelines available, it is now time to put them into practice, through demonstrative or pilot projects that enable common spaces of mutual knowledge, intercultural learning and true cultural collaboration.

#### How can this be implemented in practice? Here are some possible measures:

- Small funding schemes that provide support to innovative forms of cultural relations, including those that address emerging themes in the agenda (e.g. a combination of online and offline collaboration, gender equality, climate change, decolonial approaches in cultural relations, new business models in cultural and creative sectors, cross-sectoral collaborations).
- Targeted support to new, or developing, formal or informal networks that fill gaps in the landscape of Asia-Europe cultural relations, including those that facilitate the visibility of Asian cultures in Europe and the development of balanced forms of collaboration across the two regions.



### 2) Capacity-building to support balanced cultural relations

The aforementioned changes in both the themes and the ways of working in cultural and creative occupations and in cultural relations call for developing new skills and abilities – those that can enable balanced cultural relations across borders, as well as stronger connections with communities and with partner organisations at home and abroad. The need to support these developments with appropriate training and capacity-building emerges strongly here. Of particular importance in the Asia-Europe context is the need to strengthen the capacities to be sensitive to cultural diversity, redress colonial frames, develop relations based on trust and reflect on the ethical implications of cultural relations.

#### How can this be implemented in practice? Here are some possible measures:

- Organisation of small-scale online and/or offline capacity-building seminars or workshops addressing specific aspects of cultural relations, based on peer-learning methodologies rather than one-sided approaches to training.



- Commissioning and dissemination of self-training modules or toolkits, accessible online, presenting good practices related to key issues in Asia-Europe cultural relations, and which could be fully or partly available in multiple languages through automatic translation.

- Scholarships for the attendance of conferences, courses and other events which contribute to skill development among young or mid-career artists and culture professionals engaging in Asia-Europe cultural relations.



### 3) Advocacy and awareness-raising

Culture frequently receives limited attention in global relations and policy priorities, as exemplified by the small number of explicit references to culture in the SDGs. However, there is extensive evidence that cultural activities, and cultural relations, can make significant contributions to many areas of interest in the global sphere. In this respect, organisations like ASEF, as well as other networks and organisations with strong connections to governments and policy-makers, can carry out activities to raise awareness about the importance of culture in sustainable development. Similarly, it is also necessary to highlight the importance of balanced, fair, long-term cultural relations, and what this implies in terms of the support necessary from public authorities.

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**How can this be implemented in practice? Here are some possible measures:**

- Convening of conferences and other online or offline events targeted at decision-makers, diplomats and senior officials, to present evidence on the contribution of culture to sustainable development, the role of cultural relations in this respect, and the relevant policy approaches to strengthen developments in these areas.

- Elaboration of publications and communication tools to raise awareness of the connections between culture and sustainable development, as well as cultural relations, targeting key sectors in civil society and the public sector.



- Development of joint campaigns with other organisations with similar aims in Asia, Europe and globally. In this respect, the events and publications suggested in the previous paragraphs could also be done through such collaborations.



#### **4) Information and knowledge**

Limited information and knowledge about other cultures in Europe and Asia, and particularly those that have had less prominence throughout history, remains a significant obstacle to cultural relations. Facing this, organisations like ASEF have a strong record in presenting up-to-date information about lesser-known cultural initiatives (e.g. through the [ASEF Culture360 portal](#), as well as several publications). This remains an important area, which should ideally combine information and tools to enable interpretation of the data presented.

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**How can this be implemented in practice? Here are some possible measures:**

- Provision of online information about current stories, developments and opportunities connected to Asia-Europe cultural relations.



- Production of stories, in different formats, that provide information and knowledge about lesser-known aspects of culture in the Asia-Europe context, with particular emphasis on the narratives and conversations emerging across Asia, which tend to be less visible.

- Development of storytelling and other communicative approaches and formats that enable accessibility and understanding of complex issues and stories, and consider the possibility of making information available in several languages, through automatic translation where possible.

## APPENDIX: ROUNDTABLE REPORTS

In 2022, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the *Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)* and following the global impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, ASEF has launched a series of online roundtables entitled *Recalibrating the Compass: What Future for Asia-Europe Cultural Relations?* The series aims to examine current challenges and identify ways to develop new, more relevant and resilient forms of support for Asia-Europe cultural collaboration.

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: **EMPOWERING THE CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM**  
– ROUNDTABLE #1 REPORT 25 MAY 2022

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: **CULTURE'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS** – ROUNDTABLE #2 – REPORT 15 JUN 2022

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: **SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL PRACTICES IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR** – ROUNDTABLE #3 – REPORT 20 JUL 2022

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: **CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN POST-PANDEMIC INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION** – ROUNDTABLE #4 – REPORT 31 AUG 2022

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: **RETHINKING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISIS** – ROUNDTABLE #5 – REPORT 03 NOV 2022

The first roundtable, Recalibrating the Compass: Empowering the Creative Ecosystem, took place on 25 May, gathering 14 professionals from across Asia and Europe. Facilitated by Grey Yeoh (International Development Consultant (Asia), Australia Council for the Arts), it focused on the current state of artists, arts organisations and other stakeholders in the cultural and creative ecosystem. In particular, participants discussed how the digital divide cuts across the creative ecosystem and its activities, what are the needs in terms of access, training and capability development, how international mobility could develop in more inclusive and sustainable ways, and how gender equality could be strengthened.

The discussion showed some consensus on the need to revise ways of operating in the cultural and creative sectors and for new mechanisms to be established to address the imbalances and challenges observed. The Covid-19 pandemic has provided opportunities to transform to digital formats, reach out to new audiences and accelerate online exchanges and collaborations from which much can be learnt and integrated. However, there is also a perception that significant weaknesses remain. Technology is not accessible nor affordable in the same way to everyone, nor does it fully replace more traditional forms of exchange—indeed, for many there is a sense of ‘digital fatigue’. Furthermore, while connectivity has grown, the creative ecosystem is also, in many countries, more fragmented today, with increasing self-employment and precariousness.



As a result, the need to evaluate the recent past and the present, in order to face the future with new approaches emerged during the discussions. These new approaches should be more nuanced, helping to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of technology and of international mobility, as well as what questions they raise. The following points serve to illustrate the main questions that were addressed.

## INCREASING AWARENESS OF THE SOCIAL AND SYSTEMIC DIMENSION OF CULTURAL WORK

Reflecting on the digital divide and how it affects cultural work should also entail being more aware of broader divides—between the Global North and the Global South, different socioeconomic groups, genders, age groups, urban and rural areas, etc. Similarly, international mobility remains affected by economic inequalities, as well as by travel restrictions which pre-existed Covid-19, such as visas, as well as other restrictions that have been introduced thereafter. In this respect, several participants raised questions about the social, political and environmental dimensions of their activities, and how these should be more strongly embedded in everyday practices. A more democratic approach to technology and cultural work, an active engagement with cultural rights and equality and the adoption of the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as guidance—while acknowledging that the SDGs do not integrate cultural aspects comprehensively— are some relevant approaches in this respect. ASEF could support reflections in these areas, as well as strive to broaden opportunities for under-represented communities and stakeholders.

## TOWARDS SLOWER AND MORE MEANINGFUL INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

The increasing centrality of online exchanges and the awareness of the substantial environmental impacts of international mobility are some of the factors that led to questioning the forms of 'hypermobility' which existed, at least for some professionals, up until the Covid-19 pandemic period. Whereas physical encounters remain important for broadening professional opportunities, building trust, co-designing and co-developing projects, there is also a need for clear criteria to determine when international mobility is relevant, and for whom. For some participants, support for physical travel should benefit slower and more in-depth, meaningful exchanges—that is, travel that allows good-quality encounters and dialogue, and with time between arrival and departure. Organisations such as ASEF could help assess the impacts of mobility and define criteria in this area.

## LEARNING NEW WAYS OF OPERATING

Awareness of these changes also implies that learning new ways of working becomes central. For some, developing new skills and capacities is the main issue to be addressed in empowering the creative ecosystem. In a context such as that of Asia and Europe, it should involve balanced learning from one another, rather than providing training to others. In facing a more digital environment, learning should focus not only on technical skills, but also on how to adapt and tailor contents and methodologies to online spaces, as well as on the ethical and political implications of technology. There are also many good practices in online engagement and collaboration, which could provide inspiration and learning.

## CONTRIBUTING TO MORE HUMANE TECHNOLOGIES

The Covid-19 crisis has witnessed new formats and experimentations around technology, in a process that is still continuing. In particular, some participants suggested that artists and cultural professionals should contribute to humanising technologies, thinking differently about them, connecting them better with everyday practices and developing them in a more inclusive and participatory way. In this respect, it could be necessary to broaden the scope of capacity building in the cultural sector to include areas like Virtual Reality and Artificial Intelligence, seeing them as part of the environment of cultural and creative development.

## REACHING OUT TO COMMUNITIES, AND MAKING MORE WITH LESS

One of the implications of the commitment to address social divides is the aim to be closer to local communities. This could involve an engagement to being more inclusive, consulting citizens and audiences and being more accountable to them, as well as passing on the knowledge obtained when operating internationally. Bridging the local and the international is one way of being more efficient and making more with less. Similarly, there was a call to explore synergies between different projects and initiatives operating in similar areas, which frequently operate in isolation.

## INTERPRETATION AND MEDIATION REMAIN NECESSARY

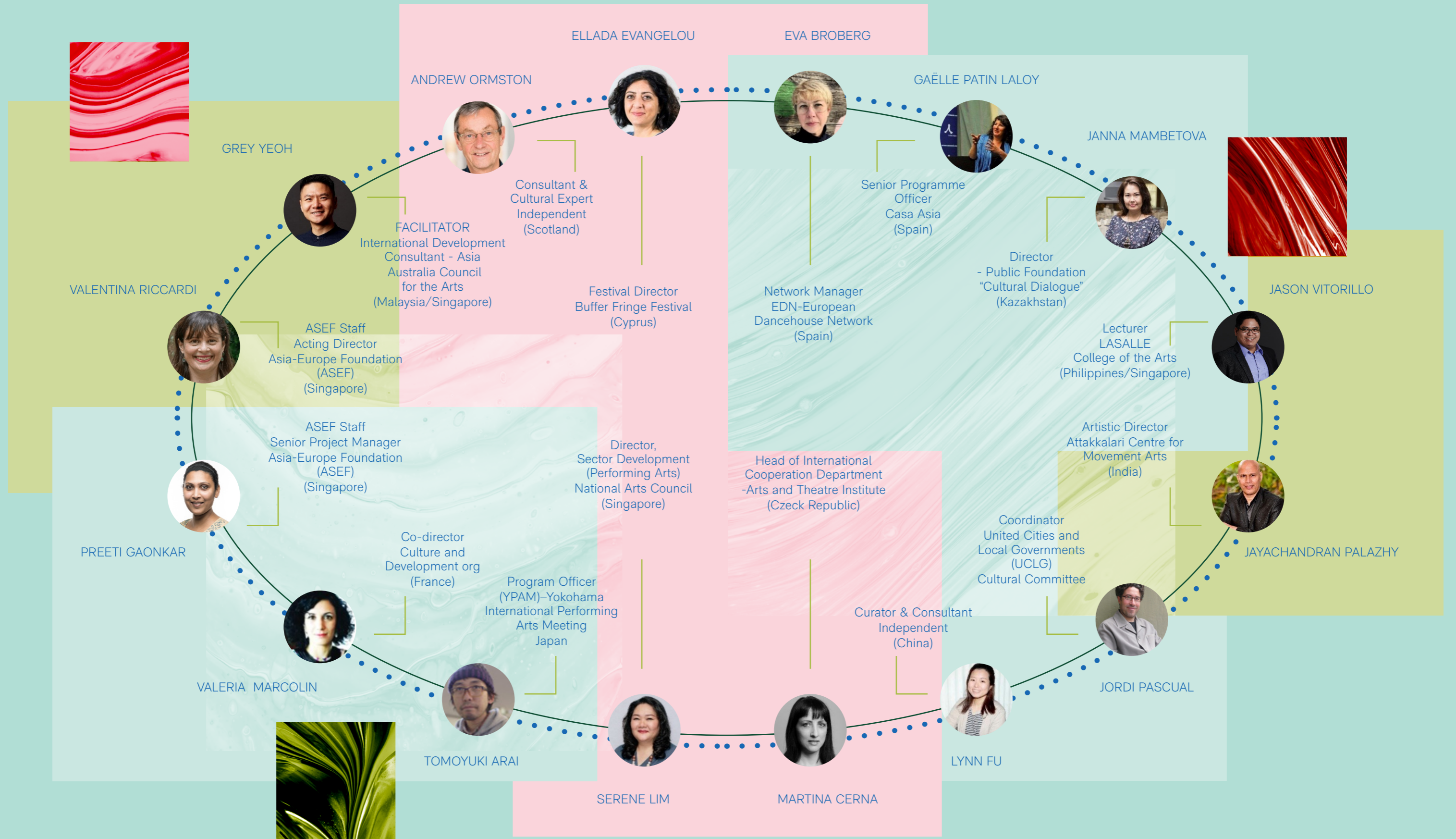
Several of the calls for change outlined above should be facilitated by suitable interpretation and mediation processes. Interpretation is essential, to start with, in its traditional meaning, because linguistic diversity in the Asia-Europe context is something that deserves special consideration, particularly when addressing imbalances, fostering equal opportunities, and generating relations based on reciprocity and equality. Some participants also argued that interpretation was needed to explore how key concepts and themes, such as gender equality, could be understood differently across countries. Information gaps in several key areas, including funding opportunities, persist, despite the availability of resources in this area (such as the [On The Move—ASEF Mobility Funding Guides](#)). More generally, there was a perception that other forms of mediation may be required to accompany progress in a digital, diverse, shifting environment, helping to assess challenges and adapt processes accordingly. The 1st roundtable of the series [Recalibrating the](#)

Compass was a rich, engaging discussion, which provided a wide range of inspiring ideas and proposals. The series will continue with 4 new sessions between June and September and will culminate in a public webinar in late 2022, where findings and recommendations from all sessions will be shared and discussed.

For more information about the series:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass>

For the highlights of Roundtable #1:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass-CreativeEcosystem>

ASEF WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ROUNDTABLE #1 – EMPOWERING THE CREATIVE ECOSYSTEM



The second roundtable, *Recalibrating the Compass: Culture's Role in Addressing the Climate Crisis*, took place on 15 June, gathering 8 professionals from across Asia and Europe. Facilitated by Sharmilla Ganesan (Producer and presenter, BFM 89.9 – The Business Station, Malaysia), the roundtable focused on the specific contribution that the culture sector can make to the climate crisis, and its responsibilities vis-à-vis this context. Participants discussed, among other issues, the creative explorations of sustainable living, the responsibilities of cultural organisations and their environmental impact, what sustainability means in terms of cultural mobility and the types of policies, partnerships and forms of cross-regional collaboration that can enable cultural organisations and professionals to be better prepared to act in this context. This short report outlines the main issues discussed during the session.

## CREATIVE PRACTICE CAN FOSTER THINKING AROUND CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS.

Throughout the session, several examples that illustrate how artistic practices can contribute to reflecting on the climate crisis and more environmentally sustainable ways of life, as well as raising awareness on these themes, were presented. Among them was Singaporean artist Robert Zhao's short film *Second Chance*, produced in the context of the National Museum of Singapore's *Rooting for Change – Artistic Responses to Climate Change and Sustainability* programme. The film explains how 'secondary forests', that is, those that have emerged in the recent past and which have often been undervalued by researchers, are more resilient to human contact, and therefore can provide a 'second chance' in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Another relevant example is *What Comes After*, a participatory performance developed by artists Jevon Chandra, Kei Franklin and Jungsuh Sue Lim in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which immersed participants in the tumult of a flood. In many locations, artists are exploring ways to develop more sustainable artistic practice and to think creatively about the future—the *Future Materials Bank* of the Jan van Eyck Academie in the Netherlands, stands as a global repository of these efforts, and helps provide resources and inspiration to others.

## WE NEED TO QUESTION OURSELVES AND OUR PRACTICES...

Professionals and organisations in the cultural and creative sectors, just as those in other fields, are increasingly revising their practices to make them more sustainable and adapted to the climate crisis – questioning their choices, aiming to have more efficient and 'circular' buildings and events, considering their investments, interrogating public procurement, etc. The work done by organisations such as Julie's Bicycle, including its *resource hub*, provides extensive evidence of this. Many local examples of this exist as well, such as the ufaFabrik cultural complex in Berlin, which *has adopted many measures*, involving community collaborations and affordable investment, to reduce its environmental footprint and become more sustainable. Elsewhere, efforts are underway to make the cross-border mobility of artists and cultural professionals more sustainable, through 'slower' travel and new forms of artistic residencies.

... BUT TO DO IT WITH FAIRNESS AND BALANCE,  
LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE

At the same time, participants warned that the burden of responsibility to change should not be placed unfairly on the shoulders of those who are more disadvantaged. The sense of guilt experienced by a group of Indigenous artists who attended the [Stockholm+50 environmental conference](#) in early June 2022, because of the carbon footprint of flying on a plane, was illustrative of this—it was suggested that governments and major companies have a significantly more important responsibility vis-à-vis climate change. Likewise, it is necessary to acknowledge that international artistic mobility is frequently framed by socioeconomic and political inequalities. This was highlighted in Mexican artist Lázaro Gabino Rodríguez's [Open Letter](#) to French choreographer Jérôme Bel, which stresses that many artists do not have a choice on whether or not to be mobile, as opposed to high-profile figures.

The notion of '[climate justice](#)', which entails considering everyone's specific situations, being fair in the type of restrictions imposed, and avoiding excluding further those who are already marginalised, is useful in this respect. Indeed, it is necessary to adopt a 'climate justice lens'. Julie's Bicycle's [Creative Climate Justice Hub](#) can be an inspiring source of information and ideas in this respect.

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CREATIVE RESEARCH CAN  
EXPLORE CLIMATE CHANGE IN ITS  
BROADER CONTEXT

Just as it is necessary to consider broader social, economic and international inequalities when taking action, contemporary reflections on climate change also serve to stress how the environmental crisis is closely connected to economic models and historical inequalities. Several participants explained how, across Asia, colonialism has historically intermingled with the conquest and destruction of landscapes, as Listen to the City's forthcoming [Disturbants of land, breath, sound: Aesthetics of Post-colonial culture seminar](#) exhibition emphasises (Seoul, December 2022). This is one of several examples illustrating the rich contribution that cross-disciplinary research involving artists and professionals in other areas can make. The [Land Body Ecologies](#) interdisciplinary research network, which explores the interconnections of mental and ecosystem health, involving artist-led studio Invisible Flock among other partners, is another good example of this. All of this requires developing cross-disciplinary and cross-sectorial collaborations, which provide space for experimentation, connecting biodiversity and cultural diversity and which, in so doing, also consider social and climate justice.



## TIME IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP RELEVANT APPROACHES

Because of the complexity of the issues raised and the need to involve many stakeholders, long-term processes enabling good quality consultations, trust-building, in-depth understanding and collective project design are needed. This is exemplified in the Kala Chaupal Trust's Bulandshahr Legacy project in Uttar Pradesh, India, which invites cultural practitioners to help communities reappropriate spaces in valuable natural areas which have been threatened by human action. Doing this implies broadening the conversation to everyone, including less represented voices such as (depending on the context where the project is being implemented) Indigenous peoples, minority groups, freelance artists, young and elderly people, etc. To ensure diversity, in some cases it may be necessary to pay participants in consultations for the time they devote.

Mutual trust and in-depth conversations enabled by quality time are also important when fostering international collaboration, as illustrated by the pilot initiative International Touring and Environmental Responsibility. Developed by the Danish Arts Foundation and Arts Council England, in partnership with Julie's Bicycle among others, it connected arts organisations in Denmark and England, combining training, mutual knowledge sharing and the design of innovative projects.

## SUITABLE MEDIATORS AND INTERMEDIARIES ARE ALSO NECESSARY

To connect the arts and the climate crisis, capacity building is necessary and requires time. Making creative research accessible to the broader public can also require involving mediators and intermediaries who can present the results of artistic work in a language that is accessible and comprehensible to non-specialists. Platforms, foundations, universities, NGOs and communication professionals may be good allies in this respect.

## GETTING A SEAT AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

Ultimately, many projects connecting culture and the climate crisis aim to influence policymaking, but this is often a challenge in actual practice. Participants considered how the alternative narratives generated through cultural knowledge and creative explorations could be presented to authorities. One important enabling factor lies in conducting good quality artistic documentation of specific places, and the stories that they can tell. When combined with research in other disciplines and presented in the form of comprehensive analysis, this can be a tool to lobby and dialogue with institutions, as well as to connect stories from different places. The example of the ArtCOP21 festival organised by COAL and Cape Farewell in the context of the COP21 climate conference in 2015 in Paris is a success story in this sense.

## OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

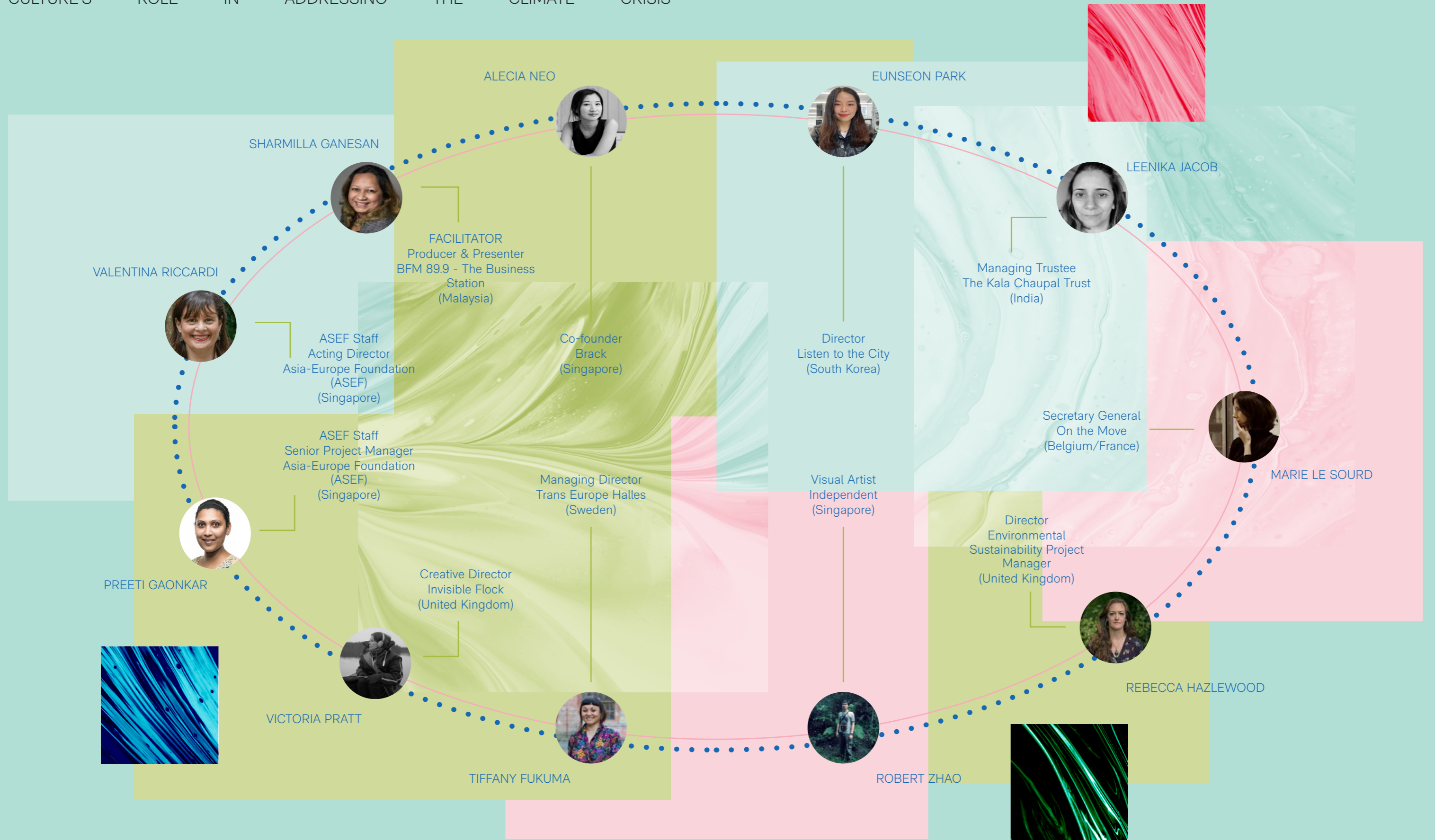
The global nature of the climate crisis means that there is an obvious ground for cross-border collaborations. This issue has been addressed by many regional and global networks, as well as many collaboration projects. The British Council's Climate Connection programme, which brings together people around the world to discuss and act on climate change, is an illustrative example, as are the many projects on environmental sustainability funded under the European Commission's Creative Europe programme. In addition to enabling knowledge exchange and joint projects, international pressure can also serve to make national governments more attentive to environmental issues, as some participants suggested.

The 2nd roundtable in the series Recalibrating the Compass provided the participants with a rich discussion, full of ideas and examples, representing just a small share of the many organisations and projects that are exploring the roles of the arts and culture in addressing the climate crisis. The series will continue with 3 new sessions between July and October and will culminate in a public webinar, where findings and recommendations from all sessions will be shared and discussed.

For more information about the series: <https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass>

For the highlights of Roundtable #2: <https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass-ClimateChange>

ASEF WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ROUNDTABLE #2 – CULTURE'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS



The third roundtable, *Recalibrating the Compass: Sustainable and Ethical Practices in the Cultural Sector*, took place on 20 July, gathering 9 professionals from across Asia and Europe. Facilitated by Prof. Dr. Amareswar Galla (UNESCO Chair on Inclusive Museums & Sustainable Heritage Development, Anant National University, Ahmedabad, India), the session addressed a range of themes related to ethical and social sustainability in cultural management and cultural relations. Among the issues addressed were the recognition and preservation of minority and Indigenous cultures, the promotion of rights-based approaches in cultural organisations, and the fostering of fairer approaches in international cultural exchanges. This short report outlines some of the main arguments presented, the themes that emerged, and a few illustrative examples identified by participants.

## FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY NEED TO BE PRESENT BOTH IN DISCOURSES AND IN PRACTICE

As in other areas in life and work, reflecting on ethics leads to considering whether there is congruence between what we think, say and do – that is, to what extent cultural professionals and organisations display in their practices the values reflected in their mission statements or project descriptions. Given that access and cultural diversity are frequently central to organisations' mission statements, they should, for instance, be particularly attentive to the conditions that enable or hinder cultural participation among specific groups (e.g. Indigenous and other minority groups), as well as consider labour conditions in the cultural sector, including the engagement of volunteers and low-paid staff.

In this respect, participants suggested some approaches and tools to increase fairness. The principle of free, prior and informed consent (to which sustained consent is frequently added, implying continuity in the consent given) should prevail when dealing with Indigenous peoples as well as other groups. Integrating a rights-based approach in the work of cultural organisations, and therefore paying particular attention to disadvantaged groups and their effective ability to access and participate in culture, is another useful orientation. Adopting human rights as guiding principle should also lead to being aware of broader aspects related to human rights and democracy in society. In this respect, some participants pointed out regretfully in many countries, democratic spaces are shrinking, affecting in particular disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

## DIVERSIFYING AUDIENCES, PARTICIPANTS AND PARTNERS

In keeping with the aforementioned aim for cultural organisations to engage with more diverse communities, some participants warned that frequently, cultural organisations work with a relatively limited number of artists and partners and tend to cater for relatively small audiences. However, it is worth noting that several organisations participating in the roundtable are actively engaged in working with minority groups and communities. Among others are SAKA, an alliance of artists and cultural workers that collaborates with agricultural workers in the Philippines; Struggles for Sovereignty, an Indonesian collective platform that connects art, food, farming, land rights, Indigenous and ecological activism, and aims at fostering social and ecological justice; and Tuyang, a community-led arts management company representing and working with Indigenous people across Malaysian Borneo. Another example mentioned during the discussion was the AKS International Minorities Festival, a film festival in Pakistan that aims to create a dialogue around the representation of minorities, including migrants and LGBTIQ+ communities, and which has managed to remain resilient during the pandemic.

Among the ways in which cultural organisations, including those that provide funding, can contribute to diversifying the cultural scene are designing more accessible and user-friendly calls and application forms (e.g. making them available in more languages, and simplifying requirements), diversifying partnerships, and reaching out to rural areas and

smaller urban centres. Furthermore, there is a need to devise forms of collaboration between groups of different nature, challenging traditional relations and enabling sustainability. Some inspiration in this respect could be provided by the recently-published book *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations in the Arts*, which examines the potential of blockchain and 'decentralised autonomous organisations' (DAOs) to enable new partnerships in the arts.

## CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS CAN ENABLE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN DIVERSE GROUPS

One important step towards generating fairer and more equal relations within countries and across borders is to enable encounters and mutual recognition between different groups, which would rarely meet otherwise. This is particularly important in a context where, as some participants pointed out, fear often prevails in approaching those who are different. It is necessary to rebuild these personal relations, especially after the last 2 years of pandemic.

There are several examples that show how cultural organisations are particularly well-positioned to facilitate such meetings. [Ci.CLO](#), a platform for artistic research, production and intervention in the medium of photography based in Portugal, facilitates 'immersive' experiences in which resident artists are hosted by families in rural areas. Another interesting example is '[Sound of the Soul](#)', a recent sound art exhibition at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) that explored the dialects, sounds and cultural stories of marginalised ethnic groups in Thailand, enabling urban audiences to become familiar with the reality of communities distant to them and often marginalised. Another significant encounter, '[MEEPAN](#)', was facilitated by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Tuyang, connecting Indigenous music and vocal tradition from Borneo with orchestral compositions. The performance was presented this year in the context of the Singapore International Festival of Arts.

Among other interesting cases, the [Centre for Heritage Arts & Textile](#) (CHAT) in Hong Kong uses storytelling to stress how the stories of others are connected to the everyday reality of audiences, e.g. between the work of fishermen and urban audiences who consume fish. CHAT is also one of the promoters of the [Textile Culture Net](#), a network connecting textile museums and art institutions across several countries, bridging the gap between traditional textile heritage and contemporary practices in this area.

## FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS AND REGENERATION THROUGH PRACTICE AND KNOWLEDGE-GATHERING

Considering sustainable and ethical practices in the work of cultural organisations, and connecting with Indigenous and rural communities, can lead to considering our relation with the environment and the climate crisis, something which had also been addressed in [Roundtable #2 of Recalibrating the Compass](#). Participants to this roundtable suggested that approaching nature in an ethical and fair way could involve recognising non-human species as part of the ecosystem in which cultural organisations operate, embracing a notion of connectedness and holism towards the environment, and recognising the value of custodianship of nature and the landscape as reflected in the practices of traditional communities.



This could also lead to adopting a regenerative approach towards natural spaces, as illustrated by Ci.CLO's [Sustentar](#) and [Vivificar](#) projects, which have included activities aimed at regenerating river areas in Portugal and compensating the carbon footprint of these activities. The holistic approaches necessary in this respect call for combining different types of knowledge and establishing suitable partnerships. [\*The Forests in the Anthropocene: Perspectives from the Philippines\*](#) report published by the Forest Foundation Philippines was mentioned as a good example in fostering cross-sectoral collaboration for forest preservation.

More generally, cultural organisations can have a role in collecting data and disseminating knowledge, through consultations, research and publications, as exemplified by the British Council's [Crafting Futures](#) programme, which supports the future of craft globally and has involved, among others, the establishment of an international knowledge exchange platform and a report on needs and opportunities in the Philippines craft sector.

## FAIRNESS NEEDS TO BE REFLECTED IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

When looking at relations between Asia and Europe in this field, some participants argued that many societies are increasingly looking inwards, particularly in Europe, where a focus on domestic affairs at the expense of international dialogue increasingly prevails. In this respect, cultural professionals and organisations have the ability to facilitate transnational encounters and togetherness beyond national narratives.

They should also consider which borders they establish in their practice, and to what extent their international work is framed by national agendas and based on inequality. Initiatives related to decolonisation in the arts and culture can provide relevant guidance in this respect, as exemplified by the [University of Arts London's Decolonising Arts Institute](#).

The 3rd roundtable in the Recalibrating the Compass series illustrated yet again the wealth of experiences existing among cultural organisations in Asia and Europe. It showed how practice is connected to reflections on sustainability and ethics. The examples presented in this article are just a few of the many that exist in this respect. The series will continue with 2 new sessions between August and October and will culminate in a public webinar, where findings and recommendations from all sessions will be shared and discussed.

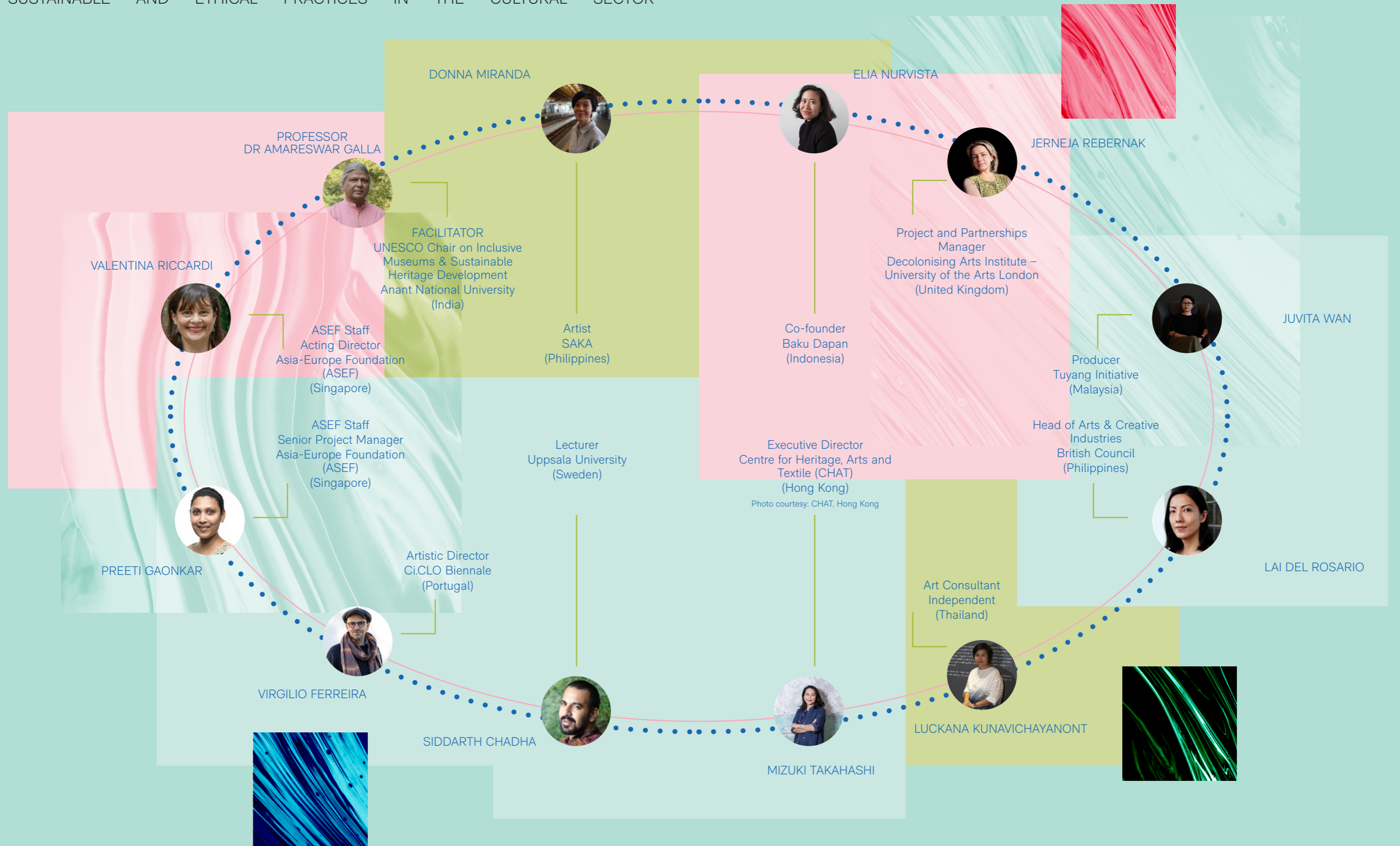
For more information about the series:

<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass>

For the highlights of Roundtable #3:

<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass-Sustainability>

ASEF WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ROUNDTABLE #3 – SUSTAINABLE AND ETHICAL PRACTICES IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR



The fourth roundtable, *Recalibrating the Compass: Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Post-pandemic International Cooperation*, took place on 31 August, gathering 10 experts from across Asia and Europe. Facilitated by Dr Magali-An Berthon, textile historian, documentarist and postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Textile Research, University of Copenhagen, the session addressed a diverse range of themes, including connections between cultural heritage and tourism, the place of local communities, diversity and inclusion in cultural heritage, digitisation, ethical and fair aspects of international collaboration in the field of heritage. The discussion touched also on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted cross-national exchanges and what new opportunities may arise in the post-pandemic context. This short report outlines some of the main arguments presented, the themes that emerged, and a few examples identified by participants.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS INTRINSIC TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

The participation and inclusion of communities in heritage preservation, promotion and management should not be seen as an option, but rather as a precondition for the relevance and sustainability of both tangible and intangible heritage. While local communities living near a heritage site or who have held and transmitted intangible heritage across generations are particularly significant, the notion of 'communities' can be understood in a broader sense, including distant groups as well.

Reflecting on community engagement in the post-Covid context implies being particularly sensitive to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly. They have been deeply affected by the pandemic, both in health terms and because of the subsequent increase in digital exchanges, which requires new skills. At the same time, from the perspective of heritage, older people remain very important because of the knowledge they hold, which should be properly recognised and documented. The [set of videos](#) produced by George Town World Heritage Incorporated in the context of the "[George Town in the New Normal](#)" project is a good example of this as it recognises cultural heritage practitioners while strengthening their digital skills.

Another way in which heritage institutions contribute to building and engaging communities is the exploration of collections as vehicles for intercultural dialogue. The [Chester Beatty Library](#), Dublin, which holds an extensive collection of works from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, is recognised as a contributor to intercultural dialogue in Ireland and internationally, through its exhibitions as well as its intercultural learning programmes.

## TOURISM ACCELERATES PROCESSES AND MAKES CHALLENGES VISIBLE

The centrality of communities in heritage management gains importance in the face of tourism because tourism accelerates social, economic and cultural change and, alongside the opportunities it brings, it also engenders risks. Therefore, designing sustainable management strategies that consider community needs and consider potential risks is essential. This was visible before Covid-19, as urban areas around heritage sites experienced gentrification and forced neighbours and traditional trades to leave. The pandemic has made other threats visible: in many places, particularly in Asia, it has shown that what was perceived as a symbiotic relation between the inflow of tourism and heritage preservation could quickly vanish, threatening the heritage preservation and having negative impacts on local communities.

In this context, it seems necessary to rely less on tourism and strengthen collaborations with other fields, including the creative sector. It is also important to strengthen local embeddedness through awareness-raising in education and the transmission of living heritage. The collaboration between Penang State Government, Malaysia, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Think City in the development of the North Seafront of the George Town World Heritage Site is a good example in this regard, as it develops a long-term vision which balances local community and visitors' interests.

While fostering alternative approaches is necessary, an observation of recent developments in Europe shows that tourism will quickly return to pre-Covid trends, generating similar threats to those of the past. Key questions that policymakers and heritage and tourism stakeholders should consider here include how to diversify tourism attractions, the importance to lead visitors to less-frequent sites, and how to protect local communities in the face of threats such as gentrification and the loss of authenticity that may often come with the rise in tourism.

## BROADENING HERITAGE AND CROSS-SECTOR ALLIANCES

As mentioned earlier, several participants argued that strengthening collaboration with other sectors, as well as within the heritage and broader cultural sector, could be one way to foster resilience, as well as to innovate heritage approaches. In Viet Nam, last year's Vietnam Design Week addressed the relation between tradition and contemporary design, demonstrating young designers' interest in cultural heritage and enabling collaboration with makers and designers in Australia.

Cross-sector collaborations can also be fostered in higher education settings, as exemplified by the Creative Cluster at Sushant University, India, which integrates three schools addressing art and architecture, design, and planning and development respectively. Other alliances serve to strengthen the voice of cultural sectors and their advocacy – one such example being the establishment of CICADA in Cambodia as a representative body of, and advocate for cultural and creative sectors and for policies supporting cultural development.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

International exchanges and collaborations are essential to museum and heritage professionals and organisations—as in other sectors, they provide inspiration and learning, enable collaborative projects and can help to address critical, uncomfortable issues that may otherwise be left aside at national level. The Covid-19 pandemic has had contrasting effects in this respect; it has limited the personal encounters which are essential to build trust, while opening new opportunities to connect online, as exemplified by the Recalibrating the Compass roundtable series, among many others. Yet it is also necessary to go beyond short-term, informal exchanges and, in the words of some participants, 'formalise the informal', generating spaces which others with similar stories and needs can also join.

Several examples were identified in response to this concern, highlighting in particular the importance of peer-learning programmes and networks which help to share solutions on the basis of common dilemmas and practical problems. The EU-funded Cultural Heritage in Action peer-learning scheme, connecting cities, regions and other heritage stakeholders, was mentioned, as was the Asia-Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS), which grew out of informal meetings and enabled personal conversations 'around shared desires and mindsets'.

At another scale, for several years Japan and Italy organised informal meetings of heritage professionals, with two encounters per year, which allowed to develop trust and identify themes of common interest. Other examples of networking include the [Asia-Europe Network of Cultural Heritage Professionals for Urban Development](#), which was active last decade and could be revitalised, and [ichLinks](#), an online platform that provides access to information, and related activities, on intangible cultural heritage in Asia and the Pacific. By translating information into English, ichLinks partly helps to address the issue of translation, one of the traditional challenges in international collaboration

## MAKING HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS MORE TRANSPARENT, RESPONSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

There is increasing awareness among heritage professionals and institutions about the need to improve accountability and social responsibility. This includes being transparent as per the origins of collections held in museums, as well as ensuring that cultural elements from minorities and disadvantaged groups are dealt with and presented in an ethical way by heritage institutions, avoiding the risk of cultural appropriation.

While several practical resources providing guidance in these areas exist (see e.g. this set of [guiding questions on cultural appropriation](#) developed by AORTA, NEMO's [recommendations for museums working on migration and cultural diversity](#), RCMC's [Words Matter](#) guide on the use of sensitive terms, and EUNIC's [guidance on fair collaboration](#) in cultural relations), it remains necessary to provide training and advice to many professionals and organisations in the field. A transformative step to address such sensitive issues may be to make heritage organisations more diverse and inclusive internally, particularly in leadership roles, something which also requires appropriate capacity-building and empowerment strategies.



## OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT: INNOVATION, DIGITISATION AND FUNDING

In addition to generating challenges, the post-pandemic context provides also a new setting in which the heritage sector may be able to introduce innovation. One clear example of this is the digitisation of heritage, which opens opportunities to document diverse heritage assets - including both 'classic' heritage collections and those that have been neglected and risk deterioration or disappearance, such as cemeteries in urban areas -, increase audience accessibility to collections and narratives, generate international interest and develop collaborations.

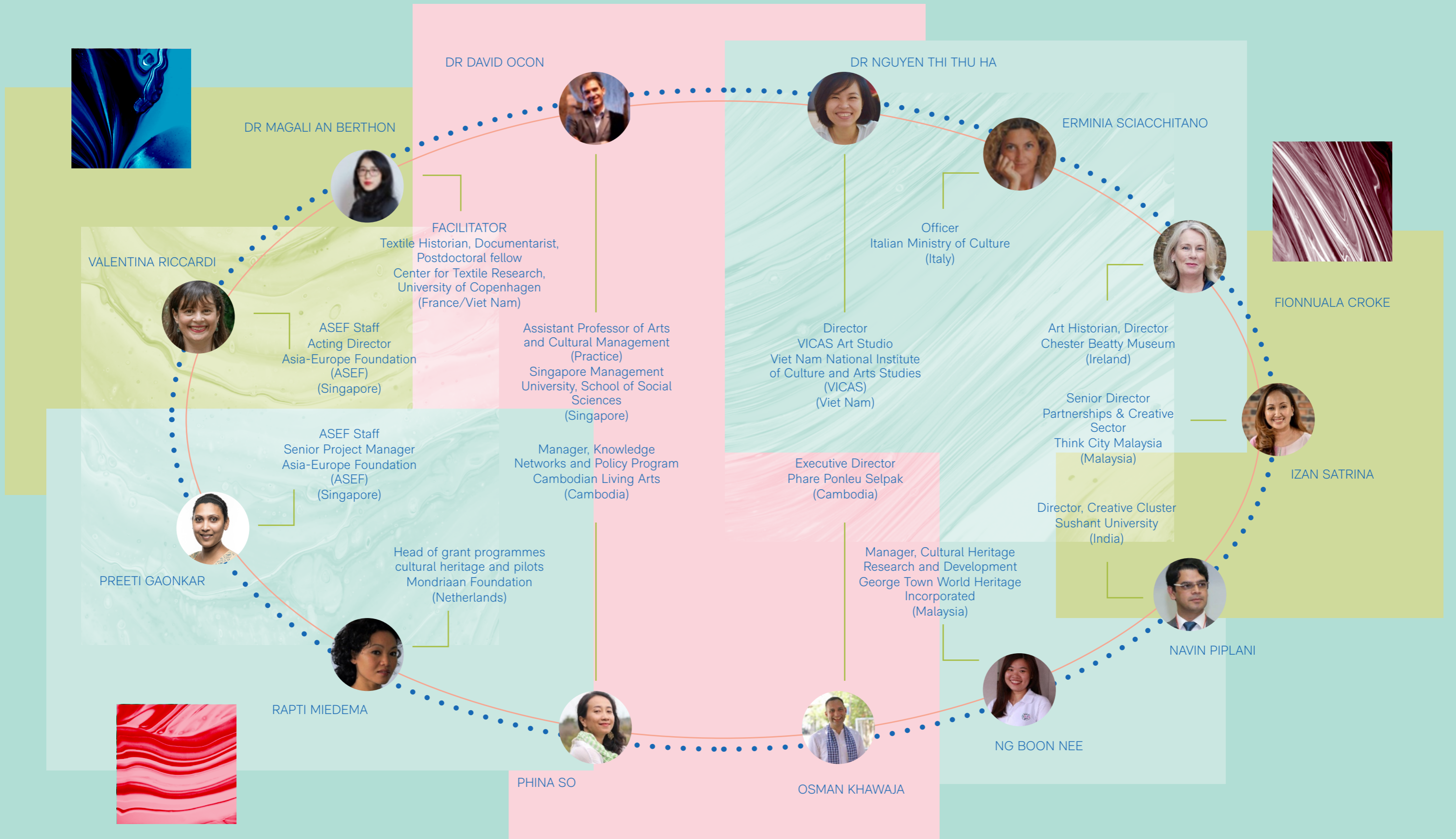
Other opportunities may also arise in the context of public strategies and recovery funds established at regional, national and local level. One relevant example is the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, under which several EU Member States have identified cultural heritage and other cultural and creative sectors as an investment priority. Meanwhile, the Roadmap for Tourism Recovery in Cambodia identifies cultural heritage and 'Cambodianness', which includes aspects related to identity and intangible heritage, as two of the pillars for recovery.

The 4th roundtable in the Recalibrating the Compass series illustrated yet again the wealth of experiences existing among cultural organisations in Asia and Europe that illustrate how heritage professionals and institutions are addressing the post-pandemic context. The examples presented in this article are just a few of the many that exist in this respect. The series will continue with a final roundtable in November and will culminate in a public webinar, where findings and recommendations from all sessions will be shared and discussed.

For more information about the series:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass>

For the highlights of Roundtable #4:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass-HeritageTourism>

ASEF WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ROUNDTABLE #4 – CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN POST-PANDEMIC INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



The fifth roundtable, *Recalibrating the Compass: Cultural Diplomacy in Times of Global Crisis*, took place on 3 November, gathering 19 experts from across Asia and Europe. Facilitated by Katelijn Verstraete (independent arts and cultural consultant, based in Brussels and Singapore) and Kathy Rowland (co-founder and managing editor, Arts Equator, Singapore and Malaysia), it served as the closing to the set of thematic roundtables. The session particularly focused on the availability of spaces for true cultural relations between Asia and Europe, the values, practices and policies that should enable such exchanges to take place, and what role ASEF could play in this context.

Given the breadth of the issues raised by the discussion, and their connections with topics addressed in previous debates, before the session the ASEF team and the facilitators of this roundtable identified a set of five cross-cutting themes. Participants were then invited to fill in an online survey to choose the main areas of focus for the discussion, taking into consideration where they thought ASEF could better contribute. As a result of this exercise, the subsequent discussion focused primarily on diversity and inclusion in cultural relations, as well as on inequalities (including social and economic inequalities within societies, as well as unequal global relations), while also touching on other transversal themes, including the climate crisis, access to culture, and sustainability of practices. This short report outlines some of the main ideas and proposals discussed during the session.

## ACKNOWLEDGING A PROBLEMATIC CONTEXT

Reflecting on inclusion, diversity and inequalities in Asia-Europe cultural relations led participants to identify a set of contextual issues that shape relations and should be acknowledged when devising new approaches. Several of these contextual issues arise as constraints to fostering balanced cultural relations: they include imbalances in resources and in the ability of societies to engage in connections across borders, inequalities in access to information, an increasing focus on domestic affairs at the expense of international engagement, and difficulties in finding a common ground between and within societies that is not homogenising but rather values diversity. Inequalities underpin the experience of other challenges, such as the climate crisis, and should therefore be taken into account in all strategies and policies, e.g. by integrating the climate justice lens.

Alongside this problematic context, some participants also stressed that the Covid-19 crisis has provided an opportunity to rethink cross-border cultural relations. While the forms of cultural diplomacy before Covid tended to reproduce and reinforce inequalities, the disruption generated by the crisis, and the broadening of spaces for digital engagement that have arisen as a result, open up to opportunities for more balanced relations. There is also an increasing acknowledgment that cultural diplomacy should adopt approaches of what is frequently described as ‘cultural relations’—that is, exchanges based on transparent goals, respect, intercultural understanding, mutuality and trust building, thus generating a two-way street that enables learning and mutual cultural enrichment.

Once this complex context has been acknowledged, what priority areas for action can be identified? Participants in the discussion connected their concerns with proposals for addressing the gaps, which are presented below. In some cases, this also involved identifying the areas or ‘entry points’ where ASEF could best contribute.

## FOSTERING THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF MORE BALANCED APPROACHES TO CULTURAL RELATIONS

The proposals for cultural relations that address inequalities and are based on mutuality and trust building, as described above, echo similar contributions made in the last few years. Participants identified several recent initiatives which provide guidance on how to rethink cultural relations (e.g. Salzburg Global Seminar's Statement on the Future of Cultural Diplomacy; EUNIC's work on fair collaboration in cultural relations; work done under the EU-funded projects Global Cultural Relations Programme and SHIFT; ASEAN's Culture of Prevention approach). In this respect, without neglecting the need to continuing to reflect and raise awareness, some participants suggested it was time to work on making these principles effective on the ground.

In a related vein, some participants argued that, while frequently there are very interesting concepts and approaches at the policy level, local and national infrastructures and capacities are often weak and cannot take advantage of top-level ideas. In this respect, a focus on training and capacity development may be necessary, so that new ideas can effectively be put into practice.

## ENABLING COMMON SPACES THAT ARE OTHERWISE MISSING

As outlined earlier, there is a frequent perception that spaces enabling cultural pluralism and intercultural understanding are shrinking. Facing this requires first, organisations and individuals that are aware of differences and inequalities, able to demonstrate sensitivity in diverse cultural contexts and willing to foster common spaces of encounter. Regional and cross-regional organisations, like ASEF (as well as other cross-national networks, initiatives, etc), have the ability to understand diverse contexts and different starting points. As a result, they can also advocate new ways of working, and communicate to national governments and funders the support that is needed to balance out inequalities. Multilateral spaces can also provide a setting where sensitive issues that are more difficult to discuss at national level can be addressed.

More specifically, in the context of Asia-Europe relations, ASEF can help to amplify the narratives and conversations emerging regionally in Asia, which tend to be less visible. Connecting the global with the regional, national and local levels, networked organisations have the potential to ensure that general principles which may occasionally be stripped of their meaning and become abstract (e.g. access, inclusion, diversity) remain relevant by referring to specific challenges on the ground.

## CONTRIBUTING TO THE DECOLONISATION OF MINDSETS AND WAYS OF DOING

Connected to several of the points raised earlier, participants recalled that global cultural relations frequently remain shaped by colonial frameworks, which need to be acknowledged and transformed. This could involve, among other things, ensuring that the training of agents involved in cultural cooperation (e.g. diplomats, managers, funders, artists) increasingly combines knowledge and approaches from different regions, and broadening the opportunities for projects that aim to open new perspectives to cross-regional relations.

## ADVOCATING AND FOSTERING A MORE PLURAL ECOSYSTEM

New forms of cultural relations involve accepting the existence, and desirability, of an ecosystem of stakeholders engaging in cross-border activity. Cultural relations here go far beyond national governments and international organisations, and rely on civil society organisations, professionals, companies, universities, networks, and several other agents. While this is increasingly recognised in theory, much remains to be done in practice.

In this respect, some participants suggested that ASEF, in alliance with others in Asia, Europe and beyond, could help to foster an alternative understanding of what cultural diplomacy and cultural relations mean today. This could involve specific actions in areas like supporting civil society networking, as well as other opportunities that help to bring new people into the conversation, with the ultimate goal of **advocating new forms of cultural relations.**

## COMMUNICATING AND SHARING STORIES

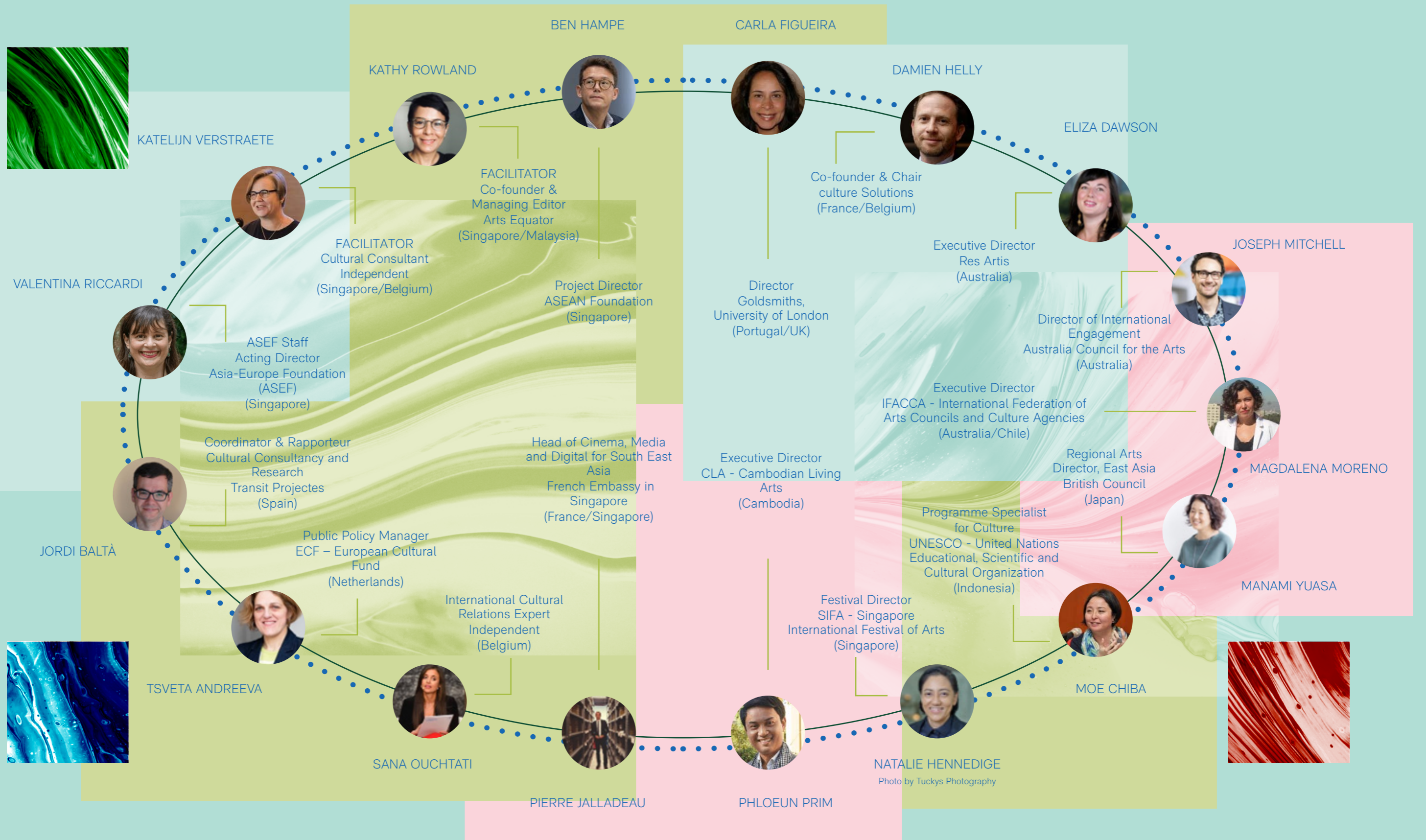
Stories can embody both commonality across groups and societies, and the diversity of lives. Furthermore, stories travel particularly well through art, and can serve to stress that which makes us all human. As a result, stories, when shared, hold potential in cultural relations. This is an area that ASEF has frequently addressed, by helping to disseminate projects and experiences, and one that several participants argued should remain central. By collecting and sharing stories, as well as by stressing the learnings that derive from them, ASEF can enable communities and organisations to better know one another. This serves to illustrate the importance of fostering learning and sharing within organisations, as well as outwards.

The 5th roundtable in the Recalibrating the Compass series illustrated yet again the wealth of ideas existing among cultural organisations in Asia and Europe as well as the willingness to rethink cultural relations in the post-Covid context, and how ASEF could best play a role in this setting. The series will culminate in a public panel in early 2023, where findings and recommendations from all sessions will be shared and discussed.

For more information about the series:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass>

For the highlights of Roundtable #5:  
<https://bit.ly/Recalibrating-the-Compass-Cultural-Diplomacy>

ASEF WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPANTS FOR THEIR VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ROUNDTABLE #5 – RETHINKING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN TIMES OF GLOBAL CRISIS





# Recalibrating the Compass: New Approaches to Asia-Europe Cultural Relations.

## Final report and future orientations

RECALIBRATING THE COMPASS: EMERGING  
ISSUES IN ASIA-EUROPE CULTURAL RELATIONS

FUTURE ORIENTATIONS FOR ASIA-EUROPE  
CULTURAL RELATIONS

ROUNDTABLE REPORTS

