

How Do We Navigate Cultural Diplomacy?

Key Learnings, Challenges and Takeaways
ASEF LinkUp | Asia-Europe Cultural
Diplomacy Lab 2024



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Cultural diplomacy, or more broadly cultural relations and cooperation, has evolved significantly in recent years. It has transitioned from being a government led soft power tool, with the aim of projecting and presenting the interests and cultural expressions of one country, to encompassing a wider range of stakeholders who, working across borders, emphasise on fostering dialogue, mutual trust and understanding between cultures. Cultural relations hence go far beyond national governments, relying heavily on other non-state actors such as civil society organisations, cultural professionals, companies, universities, youth, networks and more. While this is increasingly recognised in theory, much remains to be done in practice.

As early as 2022, the consultation process organised by the [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#) titled "[Recalibrating the Compass: What Future for Asia-Europe Cultural Relations?](#)"¹, highlighted the need to create a space for

the arts and culture sector to get closer to governmental and institutional representatives working in international cultural cooperation. In response, ASEF launched the [pilot edition of ASEF LinkUp | Asia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab](#) (23-27 October 2023, Singapore). Through collaborative dialogues, exchanges, and provocations by experts in the field, the first cohort of *ASEF LinkUp* fellows crafted key recommendations on approaching Asia-Europe cultural cooperation.

ASEF LinkUp aspires to establish a safe space for meaningful conversations and networking opportunities, stimulating dialogue and exchanges to advocate for alternative understandings of cultural diplomacy and new forms of cultural relations. By bringing together a diverse range of international actors — local and regional governments, private foundations, civil society networks, national and local cultural organisations, and cultural professionals — we hope participants will listen to and learn from each other's insights and experiences, thereby advancing knowledge in the field.

¹ The Roundtable Series [Recalibrating the Compass: What Future for Asia-Europe Cultural Relations](#) developed by ASEF Culture in 2022 revealed among other challenges, the presence of inequalities or imbalances around cultural relations, further exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For more details see here: <https://culture360.asef.org/news-events/recalibrating-compass-what-future-asia-europe-cultural-relations/>

What was ASEF LinkUp 2024 about?

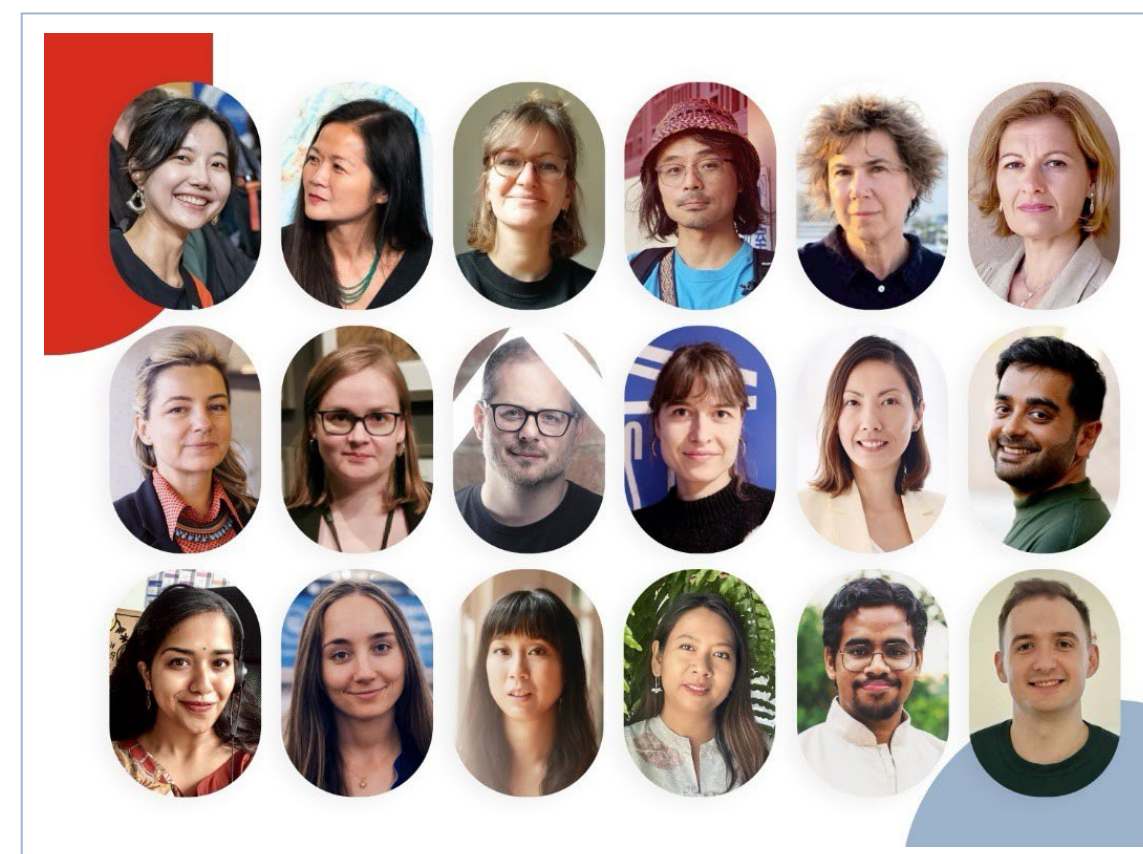
Between 10-13 June 2024, 18 participants from the independent arts sector and the government sector across Asia and Europe gathered in Prague, Czech Republic for the [second edition of ASEF LinkUp | Asia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab](#). Organised jointly by ASEF and the [Arts and Theatre Institute \(ATI\)](#), academics, policy officers and cultural practitioners from 15 countries exchanged ideas, shared knowledge and approaches, and engaged in conversations with local professionals on the topic of international cultural cooperation.

Over 4 days, the participants explored and discussed what, why and how artists, cultural

professionals and institutions can deepen their international cultural relations practice. Together, they also proposed several areas for improvement that can guide stakeholders involved in cultural diplomacy, and worked towards a set of take-aways that should inspire international cultural cooperation.

We hope that the co-created report highlights the value of international cultural relations and contributes to the growing body of evidence advocating for the arts, heritage and cultural sector in both theory and practice.

Who was involved in ASEF LinkUp 2024?



Row 1 (Left to right):

Ayaka Nishimura (JP), Bridget Tracy Tan (SG), Clémentine Boiffier (FR), Chikara Fujiwara (JP), Clymene Christofuro (UK), Hajnal Kassai (HU).

Row 2 (Left to right):

Jerneja Rebernak (SI/UK), Kristine Milere (LV), Kryštof Koláček (CZ), Lucie Schneider (FR), Malaya del Rosario (PH/FR), Nitish Jain (IN/CZ).

Row 3 (Left to right):

Pravali Vangeti (IN), Sarah Diehl (DE), Sasapin Siriwanij (TH), Zun Ei Phyu (MM), Kalash Nanda Kumar (MY), Vojtěch Pulda (CZ).

Why are cultural relations between Asia and Europe important?



The context of Asia and Europe is a complex one, involving different realities and long-term historical legacies. In today's increasing geopolitical tussle, nurturing international cultural relations between the two regions is vital to create a new, more relevant and resilient form of support for Asia-Europe cultural collaboration. Underpinning the discussions were insights from recent important events such as the [UNESCO MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration](#), which provided a new momentum for the global policy dialogue on culture for sustainable development. In this context, the participants stressed how the culturally diverse backgrounds of Asia and Europe can offer guidance in addressing global challenges such as **climate change**, **migration**, and **social inequality**.



Format and methodology



ASEF LinkUp participants debating on the principles behind cultural cooperation, each sharing their perspectives and experiences and finding common ground. **Image:** Adéla Vosičková

Over the 4 days, the 18 Lab participants formed a **social learning space** that drew on their diverse backgrounds and experiences, to consider **principles**, **challenges** and **recommendations** for the improvement of international cultural cooperation.

The Social Learning approach used Liberating Structures such as **Impromptu Networking**, **1-2-4-All**, **25-to-10**, to allow **the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives**, as well as **Case Clinics** (following the refined model by Community Engagement Fellows / Travis Tennesen) to allow in-depth engagement into issues related to the collective wisdom and allowing everyone to learn. Supporting the social learning space, the group worked with two facilitators and members of the group took leadership roles such as Agenda Activists, Community Keepers and Social Reporters (as conceived by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner).

Supporting the social learning space, the group worked with two facilitators and members of the group took leadership roles."

The sessions were divided into discussions about the **principles** of cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations (to make visible the sometimes-implicit diverse understandings and assumptions), the **challenges** faced by the cohort of fellows (to learn from each other and find solutions as a group), and possible **recommendations** for the future of international cultural cooperation.

Principles for cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations



The group of 18 cultural professionals and government sector representatives offers the following guiding principles in navigating the complex terrain of Asia-Europe cultural cooperation:

1 ACKNOWLEDGE THAT "WE ARE NOT JUST WORKING ACROSS BORDERS BUT ALSO ACROSS SYSTEMS"



Adopt a holistic approach to cultural relations

Cultural relations must be viewed within both local and transnational contexts. This dual perspective ensures that cultural projects are inclusive and relevant to diverse communities.

Take into consideration international frameworks (such as the universal protection of culture supported by bodies such as UNESCO) while adapting to the local context.

Effective cultural diplomacy requires cooperation across many stakeholders, ranging from the state, government institutions to civil society organisations and individuals to create policies that uphold freedom and cultural integrity.



Invest in empowering local voices and practices

Promote **decentralised approaches** that ensure **equity of opportunity and access to resources** for all participants, regardless of geographical, economic, or cultural backgrounds.

Challenge and dismantle colonial legacies and power structures that shape international cultural relations.

2 "PUTTING MORE EMPHASIS ON ENCOURAGING THE PHASE OF PREPARATION OF INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL PROJECTS, SO THAT THE ACTORS WOULD BE ABLE TO CREATE COMMON CULTURAL PRODUCTS"



Commit to relationship building and trust

Invest **time** in building and nurturing meaningful relationships among cultural practitioners, policymakers, and communities (i.e. longer and slower exchanges).

Emphasise the importance of **trust, empathy, and mutual respect** in all interactions. Build and maintain trust within the international cultural community through transparent and accountable processes.



Encourage a culture of openness and continuous learning

Respect the actual needs, aspirations and voices of all stakeholders involved in cultural projects, ensuring that all perspectives are valued and integrated, where possible.

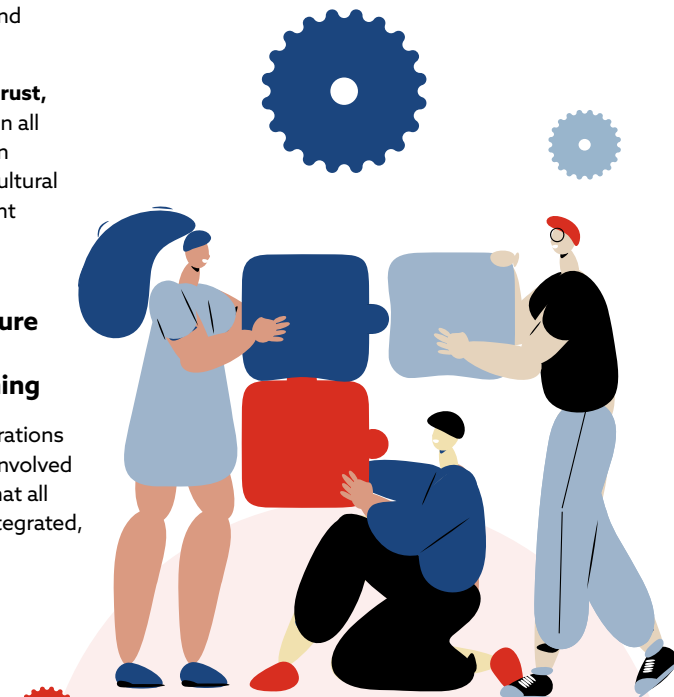
3 RECOGNISE THAT "THE RESULT OF CULTURAL COOPERATION SHOULD BE BETTER THAN IF WE DID SOMETHING ON OUR OWN"



Prioritise solidarity, co-creation and sustainability

Foster a strong support system among cultural practitioners and organisations to act collectively in times of crisis and beyond.

Advocate for sustainable relationships that ensure the long-term impact and viability of cultural cooperation initiatives.



"Cultural relations must be viewed within both local and transnational contexts."

"The Paradox of Internationalisation" Challenges in building stronger cultural relations

What challenges do we face when working internationally? Inspired by the principles of cultural cooperation they agreed upon, **ASEF LinkUp** participants shared and analysed concrete challenges they have encountered in their daily work, with the aim of tapping into the collective wisdom of the group to find solutions.

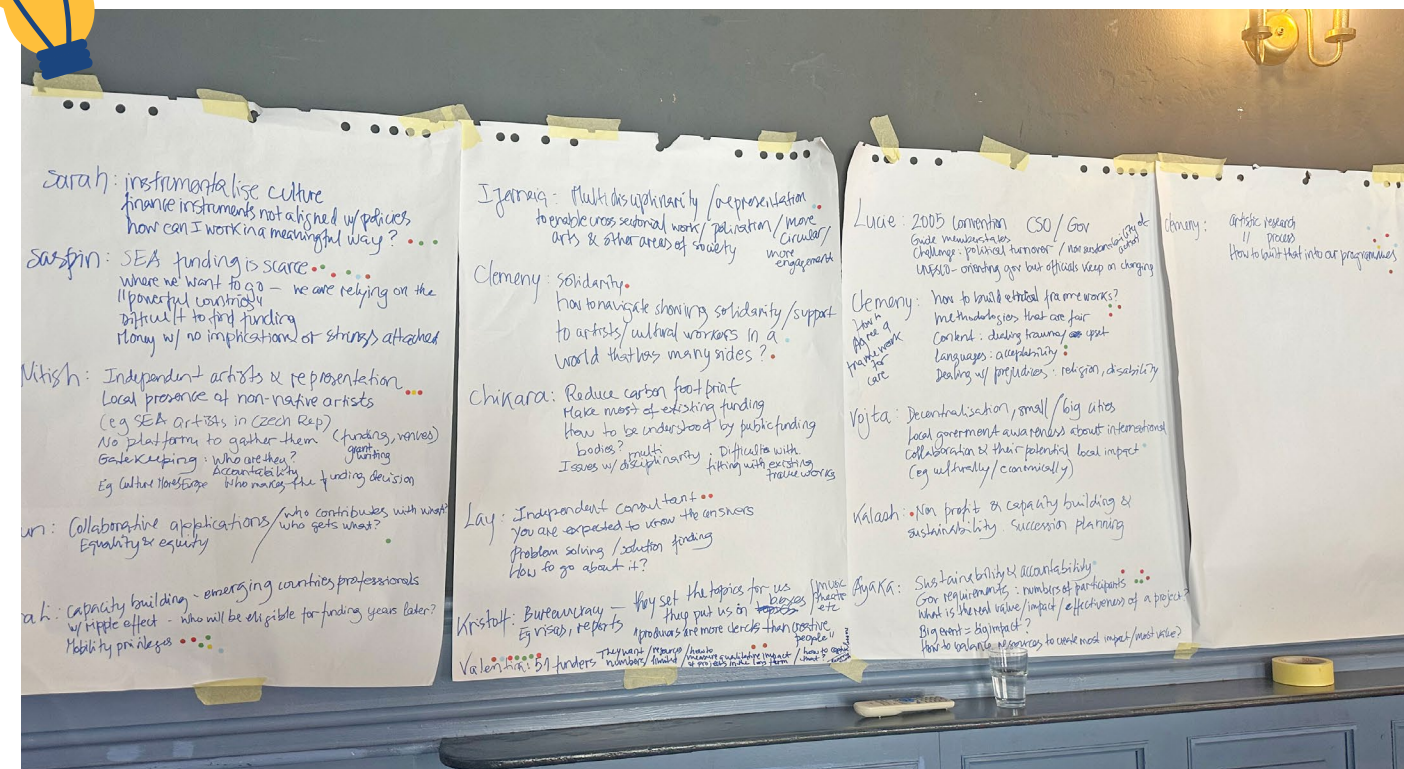


Image: Asia-Europe Foundation



"How can we find the time for artistic research?
How can capacity building and mobility between Asia and Europe be more equal?
How can we balance organisation and funder needs?"





Navigating funding inequalities – funders often require equal partnerships in collaborative project applications. This however does not always take into consideration the inequality between regions/countries.

- Balancing the resources and needs of funders with the goals and values of cultural projects to maximise impact.
- Developing mechanisms to measure both the qualitative and quantitative impacts of cultural cooperation in the long term.
- Ensuring there is cultural and artform expertise on the panels and decision makers of funding applications.

Striking a balance between bureaucracy, political turnover, the needs of the community and artistic creativity – where is the time for artistic research and development and where can we incorporate this into our programmes?

- Reducing bureaucratic barriers that hinder creative processes, particularly for independent artists and small organisations.
- Advocating for policies that allow cultural practitioners to focus more on their creative work.

Supporting bottom-up involvement to ensure diverse perspectives are integrated, whilst facilitating wider cross sector engagement.

- Developing and implementing ethical frameworks that are inclusive, trauma-informed, and sensitive to cultural differences.
- Ensuring that methodologies do not exclude or harm participants and that the language used is respectful and agreed upon by all partners.

Disparities in mobility and accessibility – especially where certain regions have easier access and travel to other regions which opens up opportunities, but this is not the case in the reverse direction.

- Contributing to addressing the imbalances in travel opportunities, to ensure that all regions have a more level playing field in cultural exchanges.
- Creating pathways for professional development that do not rely solely on existing mobility privileges.

Addressing the challenge of high political turnover that resets our efforts in awareness raising advocacy and capacity building towards governments.

- Ensuring continuity in cultural projects despite high political turnover by embedding cultural diplomacy within long-term strategic frameworks.
- Building resilient partnerships that can withstand changes in government and policy.

Measuring the qualitative impact of cultural projects in the long run.

- Aligning project proposals with community needs and government policy aims, ensuring transparency and accountability in funding processes.
- Articulating the value of international cultural relations on the community, policy and societal levels.

"How Can We Advance Cultural Diplomacy?" Innovative Approaches and Collaborative Strategies



Building on the principles and challenges, the participants explored what we can learn for cooperating in the present and in the future, examining what needs to change and how can we get there. Aimed at addressing all stakeholders in the international cultural relations field, the following are suggestions from the group on guiding the future orientations of Asia-Europe cultural relations.

1. Strengthen participatory approaches to policymaking

"How do we speak to power and how do we engage cultural actors and artists in framing work as policy directives?"

2. Strengthen multilateral regional cooperation in culture

"Systems are not always set up to support cultural diplomacy."

3. Measure and evaluate long-term impact

"Who decides what is culture? Who decides what matters?"

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



Co-Creation of Policies:

Encourage cultural practitioners to engage in policymaking, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and experiences of the arts, heritage, cultural and creative sectors.



Regular Dialogue with Policymakers:

Facilitate ongoing interactions between artists, cultural professionals and policymakers, including participation in cultural events to foster mutual understanding. This includes developing spaces for mutual exchanges amongst the government sector, policymakers and civil society.



Integration of Cultural Policy in Education:

Advocate for the inclusion of cultural policy and international cultural relations studies in university curricula, particularly in political science, cultural management and arts programmes.



ASEAN-EU Conference:

Organise a high-level ASEAN-EU conference focused on culture and sustainable development to foster mutual support and collaboration.



Regular Funding:

Investing in long-term support for cultural exchange initiatives like *ASEF LinkUp* to ensure sustained dialogue and collaboration.



Qualitative and Long-term Evaluation: Implement methodologies to capture the qualitative impact of cultural projects, considering both short and long-term effects



Transparency and Accountability: Ensure transparency in funding processes and maintain a system of checks and balances to uphold independence and accountability.



Capacity building should come early through education and value building."



We need to be pragmatic but bold and aspirational at the same time."



We need to be more open as we develop our projects."

4. Build Capacity and Networks

"In order to ensure a long-term equitable access and opportunity to cultural actors from all regions and all socio-economic contexts, we strongly recommend policymakers to work with different domains (foreign policy, immigration etc.) and ensure mobility, administrative and bureaucratic support to those particularly from the Global South."

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



Cross-sectoral Engagement: Facilitate engagement between the arts, economy, and politics to broaden the impact and support for cultural projects.



Fellowship and Alumni Networks: The creation of a community among participants to ensure continuity of dialogue, learning, and collaboration beyond a project/activity.



Role of Intermediaries: Identifying and nurturing intermediaries who can bridge cultural producers and policymakers, facilitating more effective communication and collaboration.



Empathy Training: Develop tools and training programmes to enhance empathy and understanding among cultural practitioners, policymakers and funders.

5. Address Power Dynamics

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



Navigating Power Relations: Recognising the power held by both policymakers and cultural practitioners and using this to negotiate more equitable partnerships.



"The notion that policy makers and governments hold all the power can be challenged since we as artists and cultural practitioners also hold bargaining power and social power."

07 Conclusion



ASEF LinkUp | Asia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab provided a vital platform for exploring the complexities of cultural diplomacy and cooperation between Asia and Europe. Participants emphasised the need for **sustained dialogue, equitable opportunities, and the dismantling of traditional power structures**. By fostering an inclusive and collaborative environment, the Lab contributed significantly to the development of innovative and sustainable approaches to cultural diplomacy. Future efforts should continue to build on these foundations, advocating for a more just and balanced global cultural landscape.

**// You might try to
make a revolution!"**

ASEF LinkUp 2024 gathered the following participants:

Name	Organisation/Profession	Country
Ayaka Nishimura	The Japan Foundation, Budapest	Japan
Bridget Tracy Tan	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts	Singapore
Clémentine Boiffier	ifa - Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen	France
Chikara Fujiwara	Artist	Japan
Clymene Christoforou	D6: Culture in Transit	United Kingdom
Hajnal Kassai	Hungarian Cultural Center in Prague	Hungary
Jerneja Rebernak	Decolonising Arts Institute – University of the Arts London	Slovenia/United Kingdom
Kristīne Milere	Latvian National Museum of Art/Art Museum RIGA BOURSE	Latvia
Kryštof Kolářek	Divadlo X10, Association of Independent Theatres Czech Republic	Czech Republic
Lucie Schneider	UNESCO	France
Malaya Del Rosario	Arts and Creative Economy Consultant	Philippines/France
Nitish Jain	Studio MoreThanThat	India/Czech Republic
Pravali Vangeti	European network on cultural management and policy (ENCATC)	India
Sarah Diehl	German Federal Foreign Office	Germany
Sasapin Siriwanij	Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM)	Thailand
Zun Ei Phyu	Mekong Cultural Hub	Myanmar
Kalash Nanda Kumar	Culture Writer	Malaysia
Vojtěch Pulda	Master's student of Museum Studies, Charles University	Czech Republic

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Facilitators
 Dr Carla Figueira
 Dr Claire Rosslyn Wilson

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ASEF team	ATI team
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Kerrine Goh	Antonín Brinda



The [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](https://asef.org) promotes understanding, strengthens relationships and facilitates cooperation among the people, institutions and organisations of Asia and Europe.



[culture360.ASEF.org](https://culture360.asef.org) is an online platform managed by ASEF since 2008. It counts over 300,000 unique visitors yearly and offers up-to-date information on arts, culture, and heritage from 51 countries in Asia and Europe. Publicly funded by the [Asia-Europe Meeting \(ASEM\)](https://asef.org), culture360.ASEF.org is for artists, cultural professionals, policy makers, and anyone interested in international cultural cooperation.



The [Arts and Theatre Institute \(ATI\)](https://ati.org) provides the Czech and international public with comprehensive services in the field of theatre and individual services relating to the arts (music, literature, dance, and the visual arts). ATI participates in international projects and publishes specialised and scholarly literature. ATI is also home to the Creative Europe Desk Czech Republic – Culture Programme.

