

**00:00 – 00:47**

Kerrine: Hi everyone, and welcome back to another podcast hosted by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF. So today we'll be continuing our conversation with Sharmilla. And this podcast is the second in this series, where we delve into the intersection of travel, cultural mobility and environmental sustainability. So with the research that Sharmilla has done for us from the recent updates of the guides, together we're exploring whether these concepts might be at odds with one another.

So, Sharmilla, welcome back to the podcast.

Sharmilla: Thanks for having me back.

**00:48 – 03:26**

Kerrine: Let's dive into the topic of travel, cultural mobility and environmental sustainability. So, in our previous podcast, we mentioned about how mobility is vital or important for many of us in the arts, to not only grow both professionally but also in a personal capacity. Where we travel to find more about ourselves, find out more about what we do, broaden our horizons, and also to look at how things are done elsewhere.

So with the climate crisis that's escalating and growing, there is this growing focus on sustainability as well. And I guess in the context of ASEAN, how and to what extent do mobility funding calls and opportunities incorporate all of these considerations?

Sharmilla: So if I'm being honest, I don't think very much at all and I think this might have a couple of reasons.

As I mentioned in the previous podcast, as it is, the opportunities that are being provided within Asia on a more local or regional level are few and far between. And so those few that are available, I don't think sustainability is perhaps their main driver. And then I think the other reason might be that the remaining opportunities and grants that are available, which are coming from the quote unquote, developed countries or the Global North and being on offer to ASEAN, I think there is perhaps an awareness that it isn't easy to talk about sustainable travel within the context of Asia, for multiple reasons.

Because if the idea is to go to say Europe, how does an artist from Asia do that, in a way that doesn't, you know, involve flight, doesn't involve needing to travel right? And I still don't think that the idea of doing something fully remote is particularly appealing. So I just, I think perhaps for the very practical reason, that as of yet, nobody has quite figured out how to do or how to incorporate sustainable travel into cultural mobility, particularly within an Asian context.

Kerrine: I guess you've brought up also a very important point, that there are challenges in traveling sustainably in Southeast Asia compared to, let's say, in Europe. And it's not something that we are thinking about right now, because there are other things that we are considering. Such as where to find grants in the first place and what kind of opportunities are available to us.

**03:27 – 05:41**

Kerrine: But I guess also, even with all of these challenges, how can we realistically facilitate physical meetings that adopt this concept of sustainable travel a little bit more? It could be little steps that we take to facilitate such a move to travelling sustainably, and without hindering the opportunities or the meetings between people of different regions.

Sharmilla: I think certainly there are smaller steps that can be taken. For example, even in how we structure these get-togethers or meetings right. Whenever you bring a group of people together or, you know, travel with performances, are there ways that you can source locally for material?

Are there ways that you can encourage participants to adopt greener practices? So I think those sorts of measures, which you know, even beyond the artistic space, people are thinking about with conferences or events and meetings. Certainly we can incorporate those.

I recently had the opportunity to go to the [Mekong Cultural Hub's Meeting Point in Hanoi](#) which you know, ASEF commissioned me to write an article on. And I think that's also a good idea in terms of something being more regionally focused, so travel doesn't have to involve being able to travel halfway across the world. It could mean going to a country that's next to yours.

It could also mean incorporating, which the Meeting Point did do – incorporating a certain amount of remote conversations. And in fact, I think this could enrich then the in-person experience. Perhaps there are ways in which the hybrid model could be made to work, that doesn't feel like you're getting more of an online experience than an in-person experience.

I think so far, without getting into the sort of the more complicated question of how do we make travel sustainable for parts of Asia where you know, massive parts of the continent are still struggling with infrastructure and so on. I think there are small efforts that can be made.

**05:42 – 10:02**

Kerrine: So we've actually touched on the next question in a very important point about hybrid formats. So, in ASEF, what we usually do is we encourage a hybrid format of working, mainly because we work across both regions and a physical meeting most of the time isn't quite possible for us. And I guess also to consider, even after the pandemic, are most of the opportunities still focused on in-person meetings or have you seen like a combination of both formats of meeting online and also meeting in person? And, under what circumstances if I can say, should online exchanges be replaced or complemented by meeting in person?

Sharmilla: I want to start off answering that question by first saying that in many parts of ASEAN, the hybrid format or purely digital format, while offering a lot of benefits, particularly in terms of accessibility and reach and having people not have to worry about funding to be able to travel. I think also comes with its own challenges, which may not always be so clear.

Digital accessibility is a big deal. Being able to have devices that you can use to go, to attend these programmes that are taking on a hybrid model, also a challenge. I think time zones can be really challenging for many people.

And then I think the very practical fact that many arts makers in ASEAN are not necessarily arts makers full time. They may have day jobs or day and night jobs. On top of which, having to attend a virtual programme would mean that they are essentially working around the clock to be able to attend this programme.

So I acknowledge that hybrid or digital models can greatly reduce our dependency on travel, but I'm not yet a 100% convinced that they can replace the in-person experiences that other mobility opportunities would offer.

That said, I do think that they could they could work really well in terms of, not everyone again as I mentioned, is able to travel. But also when we talk about people with disabilities for whom travel is a lot more challenging. People who can't easily cross borders.

I also think that if you're not living in urban areas, being able to coordinate having people across multiple spaces come together, I think the digital world is great for that. I still think though, that having some in-person component. Oh, actually, language, I should mention language. I've generally felt as someone who has had to moderate a number of different events, both in-person and online, when you're working with people for whom the working language is not a common working language.

I feel like those who are not proficient in English often struggle and get much less space just in terms of being able to express themselves, being able to benefit from the programme. You could argue the same problems happen in person as well, but somehow in person you have a sort of a physicality and a bonding that happens, that doesn't happen online. So that's what doesn't work, I guess.

But in terms of what does work, I've mentioned a few already. I think as long as these digital opportunities ultimately offer a space that allows for communication that doesn't feel forced, that doesn't feel extremely structured. Because and I'm sure you you've had this experience too.

In many of these residencies or conferences or events, the real inspiration doesn't necessarily come from the panels or the discussions. It comes from having lunch next to someone and you know, striking upon an idea. Or you know, walking out for a coffee and realising that this person that you've ended up with in line, is the person you want to collaborate with on something. And how do you capture that when you're doing a purely digital experience right? So I think those things need to be worked on. And, and to be fair, not just the arts community that is asking these questions.

#### **10:03 – 11:52**

Kerrine: So I guess we've touched on two quite important and maybe relevant points from what you were mentioning earlier. So one of which is time zone, which digital exchanges can be quite useful, especially when you're working across different time zones. And I guess from my personal experience also. When we work across different time zones, sometimes I question, why is it that we always have to adapt to the time zones of people in Europe?

Sharmilla: That's exactly it, right? Like whose time zones are we prioritising? And I think that, you know because it's almost natural that if, if someone from the Global South is viewing something as an opportunity that's being given to them, then that they will feel like they have to compromise. I should say I'm okay waking up at 3 a.m. to join this call. But I don't think that always should be the case.

Kerrine: Yeah, and I guess that's when in-person meetings can be quite useful because everyone's meeting at the same time, a same space and we have that same platform to kind of reach out to one another.

And also about the point on language, I do feel like meeting in person helps to get rid of that language barrier a little bit better. Especially if English which is the language that we primarily use isn't a person's first language. When we meet in person, we can use that time to reiterate certain points, summarise certain points, and that actually helps to enrich the conversation sometimes, which can be quite difficult to do if we only meet online.

So I guess those are very important things to think about, as to when and where we would like to use hybrid formats, in-person meetings or even digital formats.

#### **11:53 – 14:21**

Kerrine: The next point to bring up upon is also when do online exchanges work well? We've talked about how travelling in Asia and to Europe can sometimes not be the most easy, the easiest thing to do. So when do online exchanges work well? And what does a successful exchange actually look like?

Sharmilla: That's an interesting question. I think online exchanges work well when they're very targeted and specific. So for example, I think learning experiences, workshops, lectures. Those I think because the outcome or the impact of it is very specific, I think they work very well online. I think online meetings with a very specific goal or aim could also work very well.

I do think where they don't work well, and I've had the opportunity to attend a few of these sort of online networking type things, where they have breakout rooms and things like that. And I personally found them quite tedious and very manufactured. I feel like those are the things that don't work well.

And this, I'm sure I'd be happy to hear from people who have different ideas or better experiences. I really do think that online, shorter, targeted and specific things work well. Things that require ideation, creativity, learning but in a more sort of the kind of experience you get in a residency, where you're just around inspiration and something sparks. How do you replicate that in an online experience? I don't think you can.

I think successful exchange. Well you know, because what does a successful exchange in an in-person exchange look like right? Perhaps I think if the person emerged feeling like they've learned something, that they feel like they've had an experience that they couldn't get elsewhere, that their work has been enhanced by that exchange, which I think can happen online. But I feel like

the success of something that happens online, somehow feels like it needs to be a lot more outcome driven. Whereas I think the in-person experiences, the impact of it is something that can be more long lasting and people emerge feeling like, “oh, I feel inspired”. I don't know whether that can be replicated online.

**14:22 – 16:19**

Kerrine: No, I completely agree. The experience of meeting in person and having an exchange online, you kind of get different takeaways from it sometimes. So I'm just wondering as well, if there are any projects or activities that you've taken part in that connect people online more than just, let's say over a standard Zoom video call. Are there innovative ways that you have seen so far?

Sharmilla: To be honest, no. Not yet. I reference the Mekong Cultural Hub's Meeting Point. And I think, I think that gives me an indication of perhaps a way in which this could be imagined. It wasn't purely online but they did have, I think, a few weeks of working together and meeting and getting to know each other, different cohorts.

And then they came together at the Meeting Point to present a certain topic or an idea or to lead a workshop or a discussion. And I thought that model was really interesting. Because it did seem like it had built a kind of relationship between that group, which I don't know, I wouldn't have thought was possible with everyone being remote, but they'd come up with really cute ways to get to know each other as well. So I think I think that sort of thing could work.

Other than that, I've not seen. I've certainly seen workshops and training programmes that worked really well online. So again, I think that something quite targeted and where people have a very specific idea of why they're participating in it, those could definitely be successful.

Kerrine: So I guess what we've been talking about, it's also about the format but also giving people time to really connect with one another and it also boils down to the intent, what you are looking to achieve out of this whole exchange together with one another, because it could just be a simple connection, maybe even building rapport with one another.

**16:20 – 19:16**

Kerrine: So I guess if we were to round up everything that we've been discussing. If we were to look at the longer run in the future, what could the future or the vision for sustainable travel look like in Asia, if we could imagine about it?

Sharmilla: I think it's not separate from the conversation that's happening about sustainability in the developing world. And I think a lot of the same pushback and the arguments are still valid. Which is that for many parts of the world, Asia included, sustainability is obviously important, but we are also still at a point in our journeys where there are so many other concerns and so many problems to resolve.

So when we when we boil that down to the arts, asking arts makers to consider the sustainability impact of choosing to travel for an opportunity feels a little bit galling I would imagine. When they

are only now at a space to even be able to consider taking their work international or learning or, you know, and so I would like to see those things happen in tandem.

But from my observations, it's only the organisations or the people who have the privilege of being able to think about "oh I will choose not to travel for my work", "I will choose not to travel for opportunities and say yes to more, online opportunities", I think that comes with a certain level of privilege. So I think recognising that that is the case and that in the near future, this drive is probably still going to happen largely in Europe or in UK, or perhaps in the US, although I don't really see it happening as much there. I think is the reality of it.

I do think, though, that Asians, Asian arts makers are learning so quickly because I think the conversation about sustainability has increased by so much even in the last five years. And the arts makers are generally the ones who are thinking about it, even when it's not necessarily the most, financially viable way to survive. They're already thinking about it and they're already talking about it. And I think that's very encouraging. And if we move forward on the optimistic assumption that people who work at the arts generally are also people who care deeply about these causes, I do think that they will, I'd like to think that they'll adopt much faster than the developed world has taken to adopt it. I hope so anyway.

Kerrine: If I could just add on, I think one thing that we're very good at is that we are very resourceful, to reach out to different sectors, work our way up and look for help when we need to. I think that's a very encouraging sign.

**19:17 – 19:55**

Kerrine: So, I guess that rounds off today's conversation. So thank you for joining us for another insightful discussion. And, to our listeners, thank you for joining in as well. If you have any thoughts on the conversation, do chime in.

We'd love to hear from you. And you can find out more about the guides and also about Meeting Point that Sharmila was mentioning earlier also on our website. We hope to see you more again on our website and thank you.

Sharmilla: Thank you.