

# Future Skills: The Creative Economy & the Mekong Region

Online RoundTable, June 19<sup>th</sup> 2025

Co-hosted by [Mekong Cultural Hub](#) and [Helvetas Laos](#)

## Context: High potential but systemic challenges to be overcome

The Creative Economy is rapidly growing, and represents a significant opportunity for the Mekong Region, especially young people, who badly need employment. But we know there is already a lack of people with the necessary training and skills, and this is on track to be more pronounced in the future.

The Creative Economy is not a clearly defined field; it involves diverse agencies and actors in its development, and includes many evolving areas of industry. This offers opportunity, but also complexity. The picture across ASEAN is positive, but developing countries – including those in the Mekong Region – are behind.

Currently, creative and social businesses within the Mekong Region either invest significant time and cost in training, or bring in skilled workers from other countries in Asia (e.g. India, The Philippines).

New technologies are transforming every sector. The skill of learning itself, and the ability to navigate change and innovation may now be more important than understanding any particular technology.

- What are the skills that are needed in the region?
- As a diverse group of actors – from culture, development, education and business – how can we contribute to inclusive future skills development?

## Conclusions: Invest in soft skills development & growing networks

*From closing summary by Malaya del Rosario, [Artlink](#)*

According to both our speakers and the World Economic Forum (2025), creativity is among the top 5 most in-demand skills globally. And as the job market evolves, we also need new ways of learning for our current and future generations.

We need to find a balance between the interests young people have and the demands of the job market. To do this we need to give them space to explore and express their interests, and we need to nurture their soft skills before we move on to nurturing their hard skills. Too often hard skills are prioritised and are assumed to be what will make a young person or a creative competitive right in the job market, but the roundtable has brought to the fore that the differentiators come from creativity, communication, connection, and confidence.

We need to grow networks; from alumni networks, to international networks, cross-sector networks, and inter-ministerial networks. We need to bring together actors working on the same problem from different fields. We must also nurture the skills of young people to build networks, with a spirit of abundance and collaboration, looking at going further by going together.

## Keynote discussion

The following key points are drawn from the moderated discussion between speakers Ms. Im Sopheap, Chief People Officer at [Digital Divide Data](#) and Souliya Phoumivong, artist and lecturer at National Institute for Fine Arts, Lao PDR.

### Communication

- Young people need to know how to communicate effectively. Taking the example of a recent class of graduates from the Fine Arts University – out of 15, 4 can find a job. The differentiator for these four students is not their artistic ability or technical skills, but their ability to communicate and build relationships.
- English language is a big advantage for communication, as the market for creative goods and services is likely to be international.

### Connection

- The ability to build relationships and networks is very important. For example, the alumni community of DDD trainees is a space where people can discover new opportunities.
- Exposure to different people and contexts can open minds and increase confidence. This can be local and international.
- International connections remain important for funding the social sector and arts sectors. Young people in the Mekong can also tap into existing opportunities to go out to other parts of the world for cultural and educational exchange. We can create new opportunities by bringing international and regional networks into Mekong countries, to understand the local context, culture and resources.
- We must encourage generosity, resourcefulness, and being helpful as key approaches to connecting and building relationships. Young people must not look for immediate gains, nor enter into a new relationship only focused on what they can get from it. We need mindsets of mutuality and partnership, and openness to collaboration.

### Collaboration

- Working collaboratively, with partners who bring different skills and expertise creates a bigger impact.

### Confidence

- We need to build young people's confidence. There are cultural factors that may contribute to people being afraid to take risks and make mistakes.
- Exposing young people to new situations and contexts can open minds and increase confidence.
- Creating learning spaces that are safe and fun is very important. The arts can be useful for this.

### Creativity

- Personal hobbies and pursuits such as learning an instrument or drawing and painting can nurture skills like creativity, commitment and progressive learning. Again, cultural context may influence to what degree young people have access to such opportunities. Lack of opportunity to experiment and engage with hobbies such as the arts, may work against young people developing their creativity and even knowing what they want.
- Creativity can show in the workplace as problem solving and initiative.

## Agility

- Previous generations could train in a skill and then perform that skill as their job. This is no longer the reality. Need to be able to navigate rapidly changing environments and move into new contexts.

## Contributions from the floor

Lea Meister, Youth Programme Coordinator, [Movetia](#)

International cooperation is key for innovation in higher education and training; it nurtures communication skills and intercultural competencies.

Cross-sectoral collaboration expands perspectives, including ways of understanding and evaluating needs and opportunities, and looking at different ways of doing something.

Khouanfa Siriphone, Founder & Director, [The STELLA](#)

In December 2024, we hosted the Young South East Asia Leadership (YSEALI) Summit 2024 on Connecting Creative Economy. It took place in Luang Prabang and brought together 100 young Creative Industries leaders from ASEAN to explore regional opportunities for the next 10 years.

Camelia Harahap, Head of Creative Economy, East Asia, [British Council](#)

The ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework was recently endorsed by the ASEAN leaders at the ASEAN summit. This was supported by the British Council and the UK Government. It offers a framework and the umbrella for developing the national policies and for the creative economy sector in all the Asian regions.

British Council has also been running the ASEAN-UK Advancing Creative Economy Programme, and a hybrid policy training.

Phloeun Prim, Executive Director, [Living Arts International](#)

In Cambodia, the concept of Creative Economy is relatively new and still being shaped. The policy track is important but it takes time. A valuable and useful action would be to map and connect the bottom-up and private sector activities that are already going on in these areas, to create synergy and share resources.

Nak Thailak, Coordinator, [CICADA \(Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development & Advocacy\)](#)

Cambodia has a National Policy for Culture but not yet a formal policy for the development of the Creative Economy. In June 2025, the MOCFA (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) hosted a workshop for Shaping the Future of the Creative Industries, which involved active participation from civil society.

According to CICADA's research, in Cambodia there are 19 agencies that are relevant to creative economy, so cross-sector and inter-ministerial dialogue is absolutely essential.

Sebby Z, [Association for Myanmar Contemporary Arts](#)

We (AMCA) participated as country coordinator for last year's ASEAN survey for Creative Economy. We surveyed 150 respondents in Myanmar and one of the questions is to rank the challenges to development of the Creative Economy. For Myanmar, the lack of access to financing for the creative industries ranked the highest and this is likely similar to other ASEAN/Mekong region countries. Second is the lack of regional coordination and cooperation to promote the creative economy collectively, followed by the lack of infrastructure and a conducive eco-system at the regional level.

### Anupama Sekhar, Executive Director, Arts Equator

Fifteen or so years ago, when the creative economy sector was beginning to take off in a big way in India (in terms of the first formal arts management training programmes starting off and more young people entering the arts as a profession), one of the big debates in the Indian arts community was about collaboration and competition. With the limited number of grants/opportunities available back then (which were mostly from international funders), there was a tendency for the arts/creative community to largely work in silos, not share resources or lessons learnt, as there was a lot of competition for limited resources. The real change in the ecosystem was the generosity and open spirit of a few key Indian arts organisations who began to share openly. As a result, informal networks of exchange began to develop and the change from competition to community/collaboration happened.

### Rio Lee, Ritera Group

Education, work supply, transparent settlement and matching to marginalized countries and classes provide stable income. We have established artists, animators, writers, etc., who have gained experience in developing countries.

We are expanding to Korea, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia to build a global system. Our main goal is to build global content networking and build digital assets through the IP market. This is to create a structure for purchase, distribution, and education.

We are currently building a platform MVP, namely the RECESS platform. The development phase will be upgraded in the future, and with your participation and support, we can build a new structure of creative economy. There is animator training in the short term. Contact from potential collaborators is welcome.

## Useful links

Report on art and creative technologies in ASEAN:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/interconnected-parts>

## Contact

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*The roundtable was presented as one of a 5-part series of online events that aims to discuss the contexts of creative sectors, young people's skills needs & the job landscape across the Mekong Region, South Asia, Kenya, Switzerland and the EU. Through it, civil society, higher education institutions, and policymakers share insights and propose solutions to urgent needs. It takes place between June and September 2025.*

*It is part of the Artlink programme, [Turntables: 'LEARN! Fostering transcultural communities of practice'](#) which offers sustainable ways of learning to qualify young cultural practitioners to make a living in the arts. In cooperation with Movetia, ZHDK (Switzerland), Mekong Cultural Hub (Mekong Region/ Southeast Asia), Black Rhino VR (Kenya) and Meta Arts (India).*