

Go Digital: Sub Saharan Africa- Wales Programme Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

British Council Wales set up the Go Digital programme to support digital collaborations between artists and art organisations in Wales and their international partners in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA). The online programme was developed in response to restrictions on global travel due to Covid-19 as well as to explore more environmentally sustainable ways of working internationally. Phase one of the programme ran from March 2021 to January 2022 and has been evaluated by researchers based in Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Wales.

At the end of phase one, the evaluators found that the programme has been successful overall in the achievement of the objectives it set out to meet. Perceptions around digital collaboration have changed, with the majority of respondents considering it an effective method of working with partners. Digital collaboration made project partners feel safe, connected, equal, curious and experimental. However, while the digital space enabled partners to gain new insights and mentorship from professionals in another country, it required careful preparation and allocation of time and budget to empower the participants.

Most partners developed new networks, and many strengthened existing ones. The overall preferred method of networking was through referrals and facilitated introductions (many of which were facilitated by the British Council), which suggests the role of the British Council is valued for making connections.

Digital platforms facilitated networking in a variety of ways. Some partners used them to connect and influence, others to deepen an existing relationship. Whilst digital platforms allowed for networking and connecting, physical engagements were still considered valuable to strengthen relationships and build resilient links. Partners used the same digital platforms for networking and for project delivery. Whilst a wide range of digital platforms were used, a small number of familiar platforms were dominant, with the leading networking platforms being Zoom, Twitter and Facebook.

Go Digital aimed to enable strategic digital showcasing skills to be shared and there is clear evidence of improvement in confidence in the use of social media, digital conferencing platforms, and digital marketing. There was also a marked improvement in knowledge of privacy, cyber risk, digital ethics, e-commerce and commercialisation of creative work. It is reasonable to assume these increases in are a direct result of Go Digital.

For some organisations, the programme helped to attract potential new funding sources. Ways of commercialising digitally produced context became a point of interest, with many organisations continuing to explore opportunities. Over the period of the programme, confidence grew in using digital tools to develop audiences and increase visibility. Many organisations are increasingly using social media platforms to promote their work.

Whilst working digitally undoubtedly provided advantages to making new connections, some partners, particularly in SSA, still experienced barriers during implementation. These included access to equipment, internet connectivity and lack of reliable electricity. Some found that the time zone difference restrained the project activities. Artists also experienced health difficulties and job insecurity in the same way as everyone else, during the pandemic. When considering lessons learned, some partners would have designed their projects differently. In particular, more time would have been allocated to preparation and relationship building at the beginning.

Most projects fully embraced the digital nature of Go Digital. One artist-partner wrote, “In addition to being a technical interface for networking, digital tools are profoundly transforming our professional space.” Digital tools gave visibility to creative work and enabled it to be shared with people around the world. While the aim of the projects was not to produce ‘performance ready’ content, the wider sharing of content did happen in many cases, reaching audiences of almost 65,000, something that would not have been able to happen face to face. And, while the debate over live versus digital versus hybrid is likely to continue, online projects, and audiences engaging with the arts through digital media, are increasingly becoming mainstream activities that can successfully create new work, cross borders and reach new audiences.