

The relevance of community-based dance/arts groups to sustainable development initiatives and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Serenity Wise, PhD candidate, University of Auckland/ Waipapa Taumata Rau
Serenity.n.wise@gmail.com

Community-based dance groups engage in practices and principles that align closely with defining characteristics of socially sustainable processes. Scholars in the fields of community dance and social sustainability both describe accessibility, inclusion/belonging, wellbeing, and equity as key priorities within their practices. As these aligned practices reflect what experts identify as contributing to the sustainability of communities (towns, regions, etc), the potential arises to examine the ways in which community dance groups may promote social sustainability, and offer a relevant tool for further sustainable development efforts.

This paper explores the relevance and potential relationship between community dance and social sustainability. As this exploration requires a bridging of two areas of research (though mainly from the perspective and agency of a community dance researcher), it is important to introduce and define the main terms and contexts that are used. Not everyone reading this paper will be immediately familiar with the concepts and general consensus within both fields, nor will this paper concern itself with the entire scope of debate within each respective field. To provide the specific aspects of community dance and social sustainability that I build this paper's exploration on, I will outline subsections in this essay that speak to definitions of terms, research methods, and current industry discussions/considerations. My own findings as a community dance researcher will be woven throughout the discussion, supported and contextualized by the existing literature. As I will base my analysis section primarily on my own case study findings, they will be heavily related to the previously mentioned literature and informed by the objectives and positions put forward by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Community dance and community dance groups

Community dance as a term has developed in part as a way to discuss dance practices that focus primarily on the interests and needs of their participants.¹ There is ongoing discourse around the definition of community dance and the aspects that delineate community dance from other types of dance, leaving the term somewhat fluid. Despite the continued development of the term community dance, there are certain traits that researchers identify fairly consistently when defining community dance. Inclusion, access, wellbeing, and equity are definitive priorities for many community dance groups and their processes.² Though community dance is a broad

¹ Diane Amans, *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2017); Sherrie Barr, "Learning to Learn: A Hidden Dimension within Community Dance Practice," *Journal of Dance Education* 13, no. 4 (2013): 115-116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2012.754546>.

² Stephanie BurrIDGE and Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, *Dance, Access and Inclusion: Perspectives on Dance, Young People, and Change* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018); Serenity Wise, Ralph Buck, Rose Martin, and Longqi Yu, "Community dance as a democratic dialogue," *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 3 (2020): 375-390; Mats Nilsson, "From Local to Global:

field that can include a diversity of dance styles, participant demographics, and ways to interpret what makes an inclusive, accessible, equitable, and wellness-focused dance group, it is the commitment to trying to foster these qualities that defines the community dance field, rather than an evaluative statement about whether or not community dance groups universally achieve these qualities. For the purposes of this paper, community dance is defined by dance practices that prioritize inclusion, accessibility, wellbeing, and equity amongst the participants in their community. Subsequently, a community dance group/organization, can be understood as a collective of people taking part in dance activities, who prioritize the experience of the participants in the group, and who usually aim to engage in inclusive, accessible, and equitable processes.

Social sustainability

Like community dance, social sustainability is often defined through its principles and processes. Dujon, Dillard, and Brennan identify social sustainability as processes that are inclusive and generate wellbeing.³ Robertson emphasizes the importance of accessibility and equity-oriented processes for a socially sustainable environment.⁴ While the discussion of social sustainability and its processes includes a variety of other principles and ideas, such as accountability, democracy, and quality of life, many of the essential points from these discussions can be encompassed within Dujon et al's and Robertson's descriptions.⁵ Relevant to the context of this paper, social sustainability includes processes that are equitable, inclusive, accessible, and concern themselves with the wellbeing of a population.

The United Nations Development Programme and social sustainability

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) outlines seventeen goals aimed at fostering a sustainable world.⁶ Referred to as the 'Global Goals' or SDGs (sustainable development goals), each goal speaks to various aspects and intersections of need within the world, addressing issues such as poverty, hunger, and discrimination. While the SDGs contain language that identify the roles of education, industry, and environmental science in sustainable development efforts, they do not specifically speak to the role of the arts. In response to this absence, arts cohorts have sought to explore the potential ways art and culture can and do contribute to the sustainability of towns, regions, and countries. The World Alliance of Arts Educators convened a summit in March of 2023 focused on art and cultural education,

Reflections on Dance Dissemination and Migration within Polska and Lindy Hop Communities," *Dance Research Journal* 52, no 1 (2020): 33-44.

³ Veronica Dujon, Jesse Dillard, and Eileen M. Brennan, *Social Sustainability: A Multilevel Approach to Social Inclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-12.

⁴ Margaret Robertson, *Sustainability: Principles and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 3-9.

⁵ Jonathan Harris and Neva R. Goodwin, "Volume Introduction," in *A Survey of Sustainable Development: Social and Economic Dimensions*, ed Jonathan Harris, Timothy Wise, Kevin Gallagher, and Neva R. Goodwin (Washington DC: Island Press, 2001), xxvii-xxxvii; Stephen McKenzie, *Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions* (Magill: Hawke Research Institute, 2004); Bojan Grum and Dara Kobal Grum, "Concepts of social sustainability based on social infrastructure and quality of life," *Facilities* 38 no. 11/12 (2020): 783-800.

⁶ "Sustainable Development Goals," United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.

sustainability, and specifically, the UN SDGs.⁷ Presentations and conversations at the summit addressed many of the socially oriented goals and culminated in a report that contributed to the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education.

Though UNESCO and the UN Development Programme comprise different branches of the UN, the intersecting conversations on sustainable development and the arts present the opportunity for a more targeted exploration of the relevance art and art education can and/or do hold for sustainable communities. For the purpose of a concrete, direct investigation, this exploration is narrowed further to community dance practices and their ability to foster social sustainability in a manner that supports the following goals:⁸

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Research methods

This paper draws from the scholarship and discourse of social sustainability experts and community dance researchers who respectively engage in research methods such as case studies, structured and semi-structured interviews, and often ground their work in constructivist, ethnographic, and reflexive positions. As I aim to explore the intersections of a variety of scholarly contributions from sustainability and community dance, asserting an analytical position that requires my own interpretations of the works of many scholars, I ground my exploration within a postpositivist, co-constructive, and reflexive methodology.⁹

Findings and analysis

Participants and leaders from four community dance groups in Wellington, Christchurch, and Auckland, New Zealand were interviewed about their experiences in their respective group, how the group operates, and how they would define and describe the group as a whole. From their responses, certain social practices emerged consistently, potentially indicating a set of common contributors to the sustainability of the groups.

⁷ “Aims and Theme: Heritage and Sustainability: Sustainable Islands of Culture and Arts Education,” WSAE World Summit of Arts Education, WSAE, accessed May 2023, <https://waae.conservatorioescoladasartes.com/aim-and-theme/>

⁸ United Nations Development Programme, “Sustainable Development Goals.”

⁹ Jill Green and Susan W. Stinson, “Postpositivist Research In Dance,” in *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry*, ed Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Penelope Hanstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 91-123; Kurt Reusser and Christine Pauli, “Co-constructivism in Educational Theory and Practice,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 913-917; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

Community dance groups and their practices

“I think when you're put in a group where the similarity is that you like dancing, you find that there's actually a lot of differences between you... and you can really learn from them.”¹⁰

This sentiment expressed by a community dance participant reflects many of the priorities put into practice for community dance groups. In their interviews, participants often expressed their appreciation for the ability to feel meaningful connection to a group of diverse individuals, while practicing an activity (dance) that feels fun and supportive. All groups spoke to collective decision making, inclusiveness, fun, and personal wellbeing as central to their aims and practices.

Sustainable Development Goals 11 and 16

UN Global Goals 11 and 16 discuss the importance of fostering societies to be inclusive and safe for their whole populations, and to ensure all can access justice and other community resources. The vast majority of participants and leaders interviewed mentioned the sense of inclusivity as both a strength and a definitive element in what makes their group work. Similar experiences are echoed throughout the field of community dance. BurrIDGE details the inclusive practices of dances groups in Singapore, exploring the motivations and future plans for community dance leaders as they navigate ways to maintain and foster continued access and inclusion for participants.¹¹

Sustainable Development Goal 4

Participants' experiences point to the potential for the community dance space as contributor to Global Goal 4, fostering equitable educational spaces for lifelong learning. Interviewees frequently spoke of their dance groups as fun learning spaces. When asked how they might introduce their dance group to a stranger, one interviewee said, “Fun. It's all inclusive. Anyone can come along”.¹² Another described their group as, “a vibrant, colorful, fun dance school. Inviting, welcoming, full of passion and everyone just coming together”.¹³

The UN Sustainable Goals highlight the importance of equity and fairness throughout society, from the largest to the smallest institutions, and with regard to all aspects of life such as educational spaces and employment markets. Goals 4, 11, and 16 particularly speak to equity and fairness within social environments in a manner that aligns with the principles of community dance organizations. In describing their groups, several participants from the four case studies spoke to the fair and equitable practices they experienced, notably by means of the collective decision making the groups engaged in. Each group explained a number of decisions that are met by consensus including performance opportunities, direction of the overall dance repertoire, training, and social outings/activities. All of the group leaders shared that the group members'

¹⁰ Interview with Auckland community dancer, January 2023.

¹¹ Stephanie BurrIDGE, “Community Initiatives For Special Needs Dancers,” in *Dance, Access and Inclusion: Perspectives on Dance, Young People, and Change*, ed Stephanie BurrIDGE and Charlotte Svendler Nielsen (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 132-140.

¹² Interview with Christchurch community dancer, July 2021.

¹³ Interview with Auckland community dancer, January 2023.

expressed interests and needs were integral to the overall direction of the group. Though collective decision making can vary in terms of its ability to uphold equitable and fair experiences for a population, the community dance field's common practice of holding space for group-wide input and influence creates an opportunity for people to practice the skills needed for successful collective decision making.

Sustainable Development Goal 3

Wellbeing and health for people of all ages, as centered in Global Goal 3, is a common aim for community dance organizations. Interviewees from the four case studies frequently remarked on the ways in which their community dance group beneficially effected their wellbeing both during their time spent in the group as well as in their daily lives outside the group. When discussing an experience of attending a new university, a participant shared, "when I was a student and I felt lonely, and I knew that [dance group] was there for me and it's always something that I could go back to... it was always there".¹⁴ Another stated, "It's my self-care... when I'm there, I know it's good for me, I feel good, and it makes me happy".¹⁵ Though the idea of 'wellbeing' and 'belonging' are not identical qualities, community dance participants within the four case studies often discussed their personal wellbeing and sense of belonging in an interrelated manner. Participants largely expressed that their belonging to the group contributed to their overall wellbeing in life. Additional community dance literature supports the notion that dance group participants often experience benefits to their health and wellbeing. Reis and Oliver, Murcia et al, Park In-Sil et al, and Britten et al comprise a number of case studies and surveys that have found the act of participating in community dance groups to contribute to individual and collective wellbeing.¹⁶

Conclusion

Socially sustainable communities are fostered through equitable and inclusive practices, accessible resources, and processes that prioritize the wellbeing of all individuals. As the sustainability field discusses sustainable development initiatives that can promote equity, inclusion, accessibility, and wellbeing, it is useful to also observe the spaces within everyday communities where these qualities are put into praxis. Community dance organizations are built and maintained based on their ability to uphold socially sustainable processes. As spaces where people collectively engage in socially sustainable processes, community dance groups contribute to the overall sustainability of their localities.

¹⁴ Interview with Wellington community dancer, April 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with Auckland community dancer, January 2023.

¹⁶ André Luiz Teixeira Reis and Sue Oliver, "Capoeira in the Community: The Social Arena for the Development of Wellbeing," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*, ed Vicky Karkou, Sue Oliver, and Sophie Lycouris (Oxford University Press, 2017) 699-716; Cynthia Quiroga Murcia, Gunter Kreutz, Stephen Clift, and Stephan Bongard, "Shall we dance? An exploration of the perceived benefits of dancing on well-being," *Arts and Health* 2, no. 2 (2010): 149-163; Park In-Sil, Kim Ji-Young, Cho Soon-Jeong, Park Hyun-Jung, "The relationship between wellbeing tendency, health consciousness, and life satisfaction among local community dance program participants," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 205 (2015) 211-220; Laura Britten, Ilaria Pina, Camilla Nykjaer, and Sarah Astill, "Dance on: a mixed-method study into the feasibility and effectiveness of a dance programme to increase physical activity levels and wellbeing in adults and older adults," *BMC Geriatrics* 23 no. 48 (2023)

A full consideration of community dance organizations as spaces for socially sustainable praxis warrants an acknowledgement of its limitations. While the community dance field exhibits a dedication to socially sustainable processes, their ability to successfully achieve these processes can vary. Community dance groups, like many social groups, still struggle to achieve the wholly sustainable environments they aspire to create. However, it is not the community dance field's ability to perfectly embody social sustainability that makes it a relevant space of praxis. The value of viewing community dance as a promoter of sustainability lays in its commitment to working towards these principles. An additional limitation of community dance groups is that not all individuals respond to the activity of dance in a way that might allow them to benefit from participation. To that point, it is useful to consider the relevance of a diversity of community-based arts groups that hold similar priorities and processes (such as community music, literature, and visual arts programs and groups).

Despite the contribution community dance groups and other community-based arts groups may offer to sustainability-minded initiatives such as the UN Global Goals, there has been limited study of community arts programs within sustainability efforts. The aligned values between community arts groups and sustainability may present an opportunity for collective benefit if arts groups were viewed and supported as proponents for sustainable environments.

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