

Arts clouded in smoke

Rosalia Sciortino, Bangkok | Opinion | Sat, September 26 2015, 3:07 PM

-Link: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/09/26/arts-clouded-smoke.html#sthash.soPP2rvr.dpuf>

Arts and culture are an integral part of human well-being essential to quality of life and productivity. The arts reduce stress and trauma, and arts-based initiatives can meet people's social and health needs and improve educational and health outcomes.

This should be reason enough for governments to prioritize arts and culture as part of a strategic health and human development strategy, not to mention the intrinsic benefits of art in fostering pleasure, empathy and social solidarity.

But under the influence of neoliberal frameworks, countries seem to be heading in the opposite direction: slashing state subsidies and letting cultural organizations struggle for their own survival.

In Indonesia, government generosity to the arts has been spotty, despite the country's cultural richness, and despite the lip service given to cultural heritage. The current call for a "mental revolution" has yet to translate into investment in the development and preservation of intangible assets.

Whether gamelan, lenong (a native performance of Jakarta or Betawi) or the traditional martial arts, pencak silat, or more modern forms of performing arts, public support is sadly lacking.

Since ticket sales rarely generate enough income, arts have to depend on the patronage of individuals, foundations and, increasingly, corporations. In the process, they have become a vehicle for "unhealthy" practices by tobacco companies, which have seized the opportunity to project a patriotic image in support of "national culture" while promoting their branded products across the wide range of arts, culture and sport events that they sponsor.

In their eagerness to receive funds to create new work and put on performances, artists who see smoking as part of their way of life, don't raise questions and they exhibit scant awareness of their being role models, especially for the young. Likewise, government authorities in Indonesia — the only country in Southeast Asia that has yet to ratify the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) — are complacent.

Around the world there are increasing restrictions on how tobacco corporations promote their image and their products, and Indonesia too has passed Government Regulation No. 109/ 2012 to limit tobacco advertizing particularly targeted at youth. It only allows charitable sponsorship if it does "not use trademarked names and logos of tobacco products" and "does not have the intent

to promote tobacco products”.

Yet enforcement is barely existent and tobacco companies are unashamed in their sponsoring the arts under the guise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs or related charitable foundation giving.

Behind the smokescreen of promoting the arts, tobacco company funding is omnipresent.

In the same week in early September, tobacco control activists exposed the tobacco company sponsorship of Bon Jovi’s concert and its cunning advertisements for a high-end cigarette brand; and they condemned the compulsory sale of cigarettes to youth (many below the allowed age of 18 years) as entrance tickets to watch a local rock band in Purwakarta, West Java, sponsored by yet another tobacco company.

Meanwhile social media was abuzz with news of the meeting of lawmakers with representatives of tobacco companies that own major brands in Indonesia during a visit to the US and the “coincidental” finalization of the draft law on tobacco that followed.

Ironically, the formal reasoning for such a law is to protect local cigarette production against foreign expansion, despite the fact that major, once family-owned manufacturing companies in Indonesia are now controlled by foreign multinationals.

For example, Sampoerna is a subsidiary of Philip Morris International, British American Tobacco has control stakes in Bentoel and Wisnilak is with Japan Tobacco. In the same nationalist tone, clove cigarettes, kretek, with their higher – and unhealthier — doses of nicotine, tar and carbon monoxide when compared to ordinary cigarettes, are being hailed as “traditional heritage,” and are being included in the list of cultural assets to be preserved in the draft law on culture also currently deliberated at the House of Representatives.

Thus, through lobbying, sponsorship for the arts and public praise by the artists they support, tobacco companies have been successful in positioning their products as part of the nation’s cultural heritage.

It is an uphill battle to oppose this powerful image-making and the draft laws in their current form and to expose the tobacco companies’ pseudo-CSR. But this does not discourage health advocates incensed by the probably conservative estimates of 200,000 deaths each year from smoking-related illnesses, including 25,000 from second-hand smoke, in Indonesia.

While their main strategy remains focused, as it should be, on Indonesia’s signing of the FCTC convention, and on stricter enforcement of the banning of advertisement, marketing and sponsorship, another urgent goal should be to provide alternative, non-tobacco-company funding for the arts and to raise awareness among artists receiving patronage.

Excise taxes for tobacco products should be raised and tax revenues allocated to a Health Promotion Fund (HPF), on the lines of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation or VicHealth in Australia. There have been efforts to allocate tobacco tax revenues to cover the health budget,

but an HPF would have the advantage of being specifically focused on tobacco control and health promotion, and, if properly managed, could open up space for innovative grant-making.

A priority, in view of the predominant patronage role of cigarette companies, would be the establishment of a National Arts Endowment Fund that could provide much needed support for creative capacity and expression.

International and local foundations with an interest in health and population in Indonesia, such as the Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Tahir Foundation, might consider contributing to such a fund as it might be a more strategic and sustainable approach than the segmented, project-based activities that have been supported so far.

Only with sufficient and transparent funding will the arts emerge from the current “cloud of smoke” and fulfill their important contribution in the making of healthy individuals and society; then cultural heritage would be grounded in social well-being, not in disease and death.

*The writer is a health and social development adviser and author of *Menuju Kesehatan Madani (Toward Civic Health)*. She is an associate professor at Mahidol University and a visiting professor at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.*

- See more at: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/09/26/arts-clouded-smoke.html#sthash.soPP2rvr.dpuf>