Sustaining From Within: Community Art As Decentralized Social Infrastructure In The Absence Of Cultural Policy

Tharinee Ratanasatien

1Master's Candidate, Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University

Email: misstharinee.r@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the E-Lerng Artists Collective, a community-based art group in Bangkok, Thailand, as a model of sustainable community art practice. In a country where no national art council exists, where public art policy is absent, and where governmental support for community-based arts remains minimal, E-Lerng has sustained its work for over seventeen years through grassroots collaboration, cultural resilience, and adaptive practice. Drawing from both scholarly research and the author's firsthand involvement as a founding member, this article offers a rare insider's perspective grounded in long-term experimental engagement. The paper analyzes the collective's organizational structure, community-driven methodology, and adaptive strategies across social, cultural, economic, and digital domains. It argues that the E-Lerng model provides not only a case study of local resilience but also a foundation for a new theory of sustainable community art—one that is autonomous, co-creative, and context-responsive. This theory, distilled from E-Lerng's work, can be adapted by art initiatives in other parts of the world, especially in regions facing similar structural limitations.

Keywords: E-Lerng Artists Collective, Community Art, Sustainable Practice, Participatory Art, Cultural Policy, Thailand

Absence

Community art has long been recognized as a transformative practice that empowers local voices, fosters social cohesion, and activates cultural memory. Yet, in countries where institutional support is scarce, sustaining such initiatives poses a formidable challenge. Thailand, notably, remains one of the few countries without a national arts council or a clearly articulated policy for community-based cultural development. In this vacuum of governmental infrastructure, the E-Lerng Artists Collective has not only survived—but thrived. Founded in 2008 in the historic Nang Loeng neighborhood of Bangkok, E-Lerng has evolved into one of the most enduring and impactful community art initiatives in Southeast Asia. Without access to regular funding, policy frameworks, or formal recognition, the collective has managed to sustain its work for over 17 years. Its longevity and relevance are rooted in a deeply embedded practice of collaboration, local engagement, and cultural stewardship. This article is both an academic inquiry and a long-term personal experiment. As a founding member and active participant in all E-Lerng's projects, I offer a unique insider's perspective grounded in participatory observation, project documentation, and critical reflection. Rather than positioning E-Lerng as a case study of community art, I argue that its methodology—emergent, iterative, and community-driven—constitutes a model that can inform theoretical understandings and practical strategies for sustainable community art globally.In this article, I

seek to articulate the lessons learned from E-Lerng's sustained presence and translate them into a theoretical framework for community art practice in contexts lacking institutional support. The goal is not merely to document success, but to understand and share how a grassroots collective can generate cultural resilience, social infrastructure, and policy imagination from the ground up.

Key Achievements, Context, Crisis, and Collective Beginnings

Since its founding in 2008, the E-Lerng Artists Collective has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's most enduring community art initiatives. Operating without a national arts council or formal cultural policy, E-Lerng has sustained its work for over seventeen years through grassroots collaboration, cultural resilience, and adaptive practice.

Initiated by Nammon–Nawarat Welploryngam, a local artist from Nang Loeng, the collective began with the Community Art Project (2008), aiming to build participatory engagement and pride in local heritage. This led to E-Lerng: Art–Community–Cinema (2009–2011), which successfully prevented the demolition of Sala Chalerm Thani, Thailand's oldest wooden cinema.

In 2014, E-Lerng launched the Nang Loeng Chatree Theatre Project, reviving Thai folk theatre by connecting youth with the last traditional performer. Projects like the Buffalo Field Festival (2015–2018) expanded its impact through interdisciplinary collaboration with artists and scholars.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, E-Lerng pivoted to digital platforms, launching Community x COVID-19 (2020–2022) to deliver aid while fostering creative engagement. The Community Exchange Ecosystem and COMMUNITY LAB projects deepened this resilience, using art to support local economies and preserve intangible heritage.

Through international collaborations such as WWFES and arTech – Imagining Our Future, E-Lerng explored hybrid models of co-creation and integrated technology with community-based practices. The COMMUNITY VIBES project at Bangkok Design Week (2024) exemplified this evolution, bringing together students and residents in a shared creative process that bridged education, policy, and art.

Across its journey, E-Lerng has shown how community art can grow from within—becoming not only a cultural force but a living infrastructure of care, memory, and shared agency.

Table 1: A Summary of the E-Lerng Group's Community Impact Across Different Phases of Its Timeline

Period	Work Approach	Notable Projects	Networks and Support	Impact on the Community and the Art Scene
2008-2011	Initiating community-based art projects that integrate Nang Loeng's traditional	Community Art Project (2008), E-Lerng: Art–Community–	Independent artists, local community members, and civil society organizations.	Raised awareness among younger generations and residents about the community's cultural heritage. Sparked discussions on

Period	Work Approach	Notable Projects	Networks and Support	Impact on the Community and the Art Scene
	way of life and cultural heritage.	Cinema (2009–2011)		preservation and community participation in protecting local history.
2012-2014	Expanding the scope of artistic practices to include live performances, documentary filmmaking, and exhibitions within the community.	Dance House Revitalization, Nang Loeng Chatree Theatre Project (2014)	Domestic art organizations, universities, and scholars in community arts.	Encouraged youth engagement in community activities through art, reinforcing Nang Loeng's identity. Established Nang Loeng as a significant case study in Thailand's community arts movement.
2015-2018	Collaborating with national and international institutions, such as co-hosting exhibitions with university students and taking part in cultural exchange programs with international artists.	Buffalo Field Festival, Establishment of Baan Nang Loeng	Thai and international universities, global art organizations such as UNESCO and the British Council.	Contributed to the development of knowledge in community arts, leading to the formal documentation of Nang Loeng in research on arts and cultural heritage. This initiative eventually resulted in the establishment of COMMUNITY LAB as a cultural knowledge hub for the district.
2019-2023	Adapting to the COVID-19 crisis by using digital platforms to foster artistic collaboration and preserve community knowledge. Partnered with human rights organizations to support and protect community rights.	Community x COVID-19, Community Exchange Ecosystem, Whenever Wherever Festival (WWFES)	Amnesty International Thailand, Contemporary Art Institutions, EUNIC, and international arts networks.	Innovated new community art practices that could be accessed through digital technology, positioning E-Lerng as one of Thailand's pioneering groups in digital-era social arts. Recognized as Thailand's representative in global art forums.
2024-Present	Driving work through data and technology, such as	COMMUNITY LAB expansion,	Government agencies, international	Developed sustainable cultural preservation strategies by integrating

Period	Work Approach	Notable Projects	Networks and Support	Impact on the Community and the Art Scene
	developing a digital cultural archive and employing AI/Photogrammetry to document traditional arts and culture.	COMMUNITY VIBES (Bangkok Design Week 2024), arTech – Imagining Our Future	cultural organizations such as UNESCO, the British Council, EUNIC, and international universities.	technology. Established Nang Loeng as a model community for cultural conservation and technology-infused artistic production while advocating for national policies supporting community arts.

Measurable Outcomes

Social Impact

The E-Lerng Artists Collective has not merely created art—it has transformed Nang Loeng's social fabric. Amid rapid urban change in Bangkok, E-Lerng fostered deep trust, shared responsibility, and solidarity through over 120 community art projects since 2008, involving more than 3,500 participants across generations.

During the COVID-19 crisis, this social infrastructure proved vital. Through *the Community x COVID-19* initiative, E-Lerng mobilized 150 local volunteers to aid 54 low-income communities—reaching over 10,000 households with food, medical kits, and emotional support. This swift response, achieved without government funding, was made possible by the community bonds that art had helped cultivate over time.

Survey data collected after key events revealed the depth of social cohesion engendered by these projects. According to post-project evaluations:

- 85% of residents reported stronger relationships with their neighbors after taking part in E-Lerng activities.
- 76% expressed increased pride in their community identity, particularly among youth and elderly participants.
- Over 65% of respondents stated they were more likely to engage in community-led problem-solving after their involvement in E-Lerng projects.

Compared to communities without art-based infrastructure, Nang Loeng—through E-Lerng's long-term work—demonstrated significantly higher resilience during times of crisis without formal government support.

This level of rapid response was only possible because of years of embedded cultural work. As Putnam emphasizes, reciprocal civic engagement nurtures the trust and networks necessary for democratic resilience, while Matarasso shows that participation in the arts contributes directly to social cohesion and local capacity-building. E-Lerng's trajectory affirms both insights: through decentralized, artist-led engagement, the collective fostered enduring systems of trust, reciprocity, and mutual care. In the absence of formal cultural

policy, E-Lerng cultivated a living social infrastructure—one that proved essential not only for cultural sustainability, but for collective survival.



Figure 1. Collaboration of Nang Loeng Community Members in the *Community x COVID-19* Source: COMMUNITY LAB (2025)

Cultural Dimension

In Nang Loeng, culture is not a relic but a living practice. E-Lerng has played a vital role in preserving and revitalizing the community's heritage through projects such as *E-Lerng: Art–Community–Cinema* (2009–2011), which successfully prevented the demolition of Sala Chalerm Thani—the oldest wooden cinema in Bangkok—by engaging residents as storytellers and co-creators.

In 2014, the *Nang Loeng Chatri Theatre* Project connected the last traditional Chatri performer, Kru Kanya Thipayosot, with local youth and Japanese artists. Their collaborative performance, blending traditional and contemporary forms, drew over 600 attendees and marked a key moment of cultural transmission.

To ensure long-term preservation, E-Lerng established *COMMUNITY LAB*, a digital archive accessible via mobile devices. To date, over 300 items—including photographs, sketches, and oral histories—have been digitized with community participation, creating a living cultural database for future generations.

The collective's model has earned international recognition. In 2022, UNESCO selected E-Lerng as a case study in its report on Culture and Digital Technologies. The group has also hosted artist residencies with participants from over 15 countries, all of whom engaged in co-creation with the Nang Loeng community.

These efforts affirm that cultural sustainability is not about preserving tradition in stasis but about opening spaces for evolution and shared authorship. What was once a heritage at risk is now a dynamic source of identity, pride, and global engagement.



Figure 2. The use of Chatree dance postures to create tools for learning Chatree dance via hand-tracking devices and virtual reality (VR).
Source: COMMUNITY LAB (2025)



Figure 3. Nammon, representing the E-Lerng Artists Collective, speaking as a panelist at *UNESCO's 2023 World Forum for Intangible Cultural Heritage* in South Korea.
Source: COMMUNITY LAB (2025)

Economic Impact: Creating Opportunity and Stimulating the Local Economy through Art and Culture

E-Lerng's work demonstrates how community art can stimulate local economies. Through a range of initiatives—including annual events like the *Buffalo Field Festival*—their programs have consistently drawn over 1,000 visitors per year, contributing to a 25–30% increase in revenue for neighborhood businesses during project periods.

Beyond festivals, projects like *Studio UpCircle* and the *Nang Loeng Plastic Bank* generate 450,000–500,000 THB (USD 13,000–14,000) in annual income by turning waste into creative goods—providing over 50 residents with supplementary income and reducing 40% of local plastic waste.

In 2023, the collective piloted *Community Coin*, a neighborhood exchange system where participation in art and sustainability projects is rewarded with credits, reinforcing local circular economies. These efforts, while non-profit, prioritize resilience and self-reliance over commodification—offering a sustainable model of creative economics rooted in community values.



Figure 4. Community upcycled products developed by *Studio UpCircle.* Source: Studio UpCircle (2025)

Quality of Life

E-Lerng's long-term engagement has meaningfully enhanced the wellbeing of Nang Loeng residents—physically, emotionally, and socially. Through grassroots-driven art practices, the collective has demonstrated how creativity can uplift daily life in tangible ways.

In *Out of the Blue!,* over 200 residents co-created mirrored installations that transformed narrow alleyways into reflective spaces of light and calm. Post-project surveys showed that 78% of participants experienced reduced stress and anxiety.

During the pandemic, the *Community x COVID-19* initiative provided vital support to over 10,000 households across 54 communities, including seven relief kitchens, online art therapy, and educational kits—proving art's role in both material and emotional survival.

Over the past decade, E-Lerng has mentored more than 3,000 youth through programs that foster critical thinking, intergenerational exchange, and civic responsibility. Collaborative performances between elders and children have strengthened emotional bonds and reduced social isolation.

A 2024 survey revealed that 85% of Nang Loeng residents felt more "at home" because of these activities, while 76% reported newfound pride in their community—evidence that art, when embedded in everyday life, can transform not just space, but the very sense of belonging.



Figure 5. Sky reflection drawing activity from the *Out of the Blue!* project held in the garden Source: COMMUNITY LAB (2025)

Social Empowerment and Community Agency

At the core of E-Lerng's philosophy is a commitment to redistributing power—through local ownership, artistic confidence, and civic imagination. The collective has shifted Nang Loeng's narrative from cultural loss to community-driven empowerment.

More than 500 residents have taken part not as passive recipients but as co-creators, curators, and decision-makers. In post-project evaluations, 90% said they felt they had a "voice" in shaping their community's cultural identity.

Projects like *COMMUNITY VIBES* (2024) and *Community {art} LAB* (2025) exemplified this shift, inviting residents—young and old—to lead in artistic production, curation, and storytelling. The boundaries between artist and audience were deliberately blurred, turning art into a shared civic language.

Over the past three years, more than 20 community-led initiatives have emerged from *COMMUNITY LAB*, ranging from waste-to-art businesses to heritage mapping—many now run independently with minimal outside support.

This model of decentralized authorship offers a new paradigm for grassroots cultural governance—proving that even in the absence of formal policy or funding, community agency can thrive through art when trust, creativity, and continuity are nurtured from within.



Figure 6. Community members take part in every stage of the *Buffalo Field Festival.* Source: Openspace (2025)



Figure 7. A performance at the *Buffalo Field Festival* featuring community members as both performers and the primary audience.
Source: Openspace (2025)

Sustainability Indicators

In a country lacking a national arts council, coherent cultural policy, or long-term public funding, the E-Lerng Artists Collective has not only endured—but evolved. Its 17-year continuity is the result of intentional strategies rooted in relational leadership, mutual care, and cultural embeddedness, rather than financial backing.

Central to E-Lerng's sustainability is its horizontal, rotating leadership model. Instead of a fixed hierarchy, the group functions as a decentralized network of artists, elders, youth, and residents. Roles shift, decisions are shared, and creative authorship is distributed. This

structure ensures that no single departure destabilizes the whole—responsibility, memory, and momentum collectively held.

E-Lerng also operates as a cultural common. Tools, space, skills, and even meals are shared and redistributed when needed. These informal systems—born from scarcity—have made the collective resilient in the absence of state support. Rather than wait for funding or permission, E-Lerng cultivates a self-sustaining ecology that values reciprocity over resource extraction.

This model proved crucial during times of disruption. While many global initiatives paused during COVID-19, E-Lerng adapted quickly shifting to digital platforms, launching virtual workshops, and coordinating grassroots aid across 54 communities. Over 10,000 households were reached, not because of institutional intervention, but because the group had already spent years building trust and interdependence.

E-Lerng's sustainability also lies in its hyperlocal grounding. By anchoring its work in Nang Loeng's stories, rituals, and daily life, it asserts cultural presence amid threats of gentrification. Initiatives like COMMUNITY LAB document neighborhood memory while empowering residents to claim space, authorship, and identity in the face of erasure.

What makes E-Lerng's model remarkable is not just its survival—but its integration. Art is not a seasonal event or project output. It is embedded in everyday life: in rooftop rehearsals, kitchen conversations, and intergenerational collaboration. In Nang Loeng, art is not separate from the community, it is the architecture of its resilience.

Community Art Beyond Aesthetics: Decentralization Social Infrastructure

Drawing from over seventeen years of embedded practice with the E-Lerng Artists Collective, I propose a new theoretical lens for understanding sustainable community art: Community Art as Decentralized Social Infrastructure. This theory leaves from institutional frameworks that treat art as an isolated cultural product and instead finds art within the everyday systems of community resilience, local governance, and grassroots knowledge production.

Unlike existing models that emphasize external funding, policy mandates, or state-sanctioned art councils, the E-Lerng experience offers a reverse paradigm. We did not wait for infrastructure to be built to create art—we became the infrastructure. Our collective operated not just as artists, but as community mediators, caretakers of memory, designers of informal education, and facilitators of mutual aid. Over time, this model proved that art initiatives can survive and thrive not because they are supported by a centralized system, but because they are the system.

This model challenges traditional notions of sustainability. Rather than asking how a project can continue after funding ends, we asked: How can this practice be self-generating, adaptable, and integrated into daily life? We relied on shared leadership, rotating responsibilities, and a commitment to relational over transactional engagement. Our practices—whether revitalizing a neighborhood cinema, mapping oral histories, or organizing community art festivals—were not "outputs," but components of a living system that reinforced the community's ability to care for itself.

At its core, this theory argues that instead of building systems to support art, we must support the social systems that generate art. By understanding art as embedded within the lived infrastructure of community life—its rituals, relationships, spaces, and informal economies—we can more accurately sustain it. E-Lerng did not survive because it received continuous funding or endorsement. It endured because it became woven into the very fabric of Nang Loeng's identity. It is this quality—embeddedness—that lies at the heart of the theory.
The theoretical patterns that emerged from this long-term engagement as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Core Theoretical Dimensions: Community Art as Decentralized Social Infrastructure

Theoretical Element	Explanation
1. Art as Infrastructure, not Output	Community art is redefined as a *social system* rather than an art product — functioning as infrastructure for care, learning, and co-existence.
2. Embeddedness as Survival	Sustainability arises from being woven into everyday life, local memory, and informal networks — not from external funding or institutional legitimacy.
3. Bottom-Up Cultural Governance	Leadership is distributed, decisions are made collectively, and trust is prioritized over efficiency — contrasting hierarchical policy structures.
4. Decentralization as Political Position	The model rejects reliance on top-down policy. Instead, it affirms local agency as a form of cultural self-determination and resilience.
5. Art as Process, not Product	Artistic practice is understood as ongoing negotiation, relationship-building, and mutual care — not limited to exhibitions, events, or final outcomes.
6. Practice as Policy	In the absence of state policy, practice itself becomes a form of living cultural governance — responsive, relational, and embedded in local realities.
7. Community as Generator of Value	Artistic content, relevance, and impact emerge from within — through local knowledge, intergenerational learning, and everyday rituals — rather than being imposed externally.

These insights form the backbone of a theory that not only explains E-Lerng's durability but also offers a generative lens for rethinking how we define, support, and evaluate community art globally. Rather than viewing art as the "output" of a system, we are invited to see it as a symptom of a healthy social infrastructure—one that is inclusive, flexible, rooted, and alive.

Policy Implications and Global Relevance

Rethinking Sustainability: From Funding to Foundations

Traditional cultural policy often frames sustainability through the lens of funding continuity, measurable impact, or institutional affiliation. But E-Lerng's case shifts the conversation from supporting the arts to supporting the social systems that produce art. These systems include local knowledge networks, intergenerational trust, informal mentorships, place-based cultural memory, and micro-ecologies of care. By maintaining porous boundaries

between artists and community members, E-Lerng functions less like a project and more like a social organism—adaptive, resilient, and deeply rooted.

Rather than replicating the institutional models of the Global North, where sustainability is often tied to grants and metrics, E-Lerng offers a different vision: a sustainability born of relationships, responsiveness, and shared ownership. This calls for a redefinition of sustainability that recognizes informal, relational infrastructures as valid and vital cultural assets. It is precisely because E-Lerng was not beholden to rigid bureaucracies or external KPIs that it was able to remain flexible, experimental, and deeply attuned to the shifting needs of the Nang Loeng community.

From Cultural Product to Cultural Process

In most state-led or institutionally supported community art programs, success is often measured by the product—an exhibition, a mural, a performance, a report. However, E-Lerng flips this logic. For the collective, art is not a means to produce a singular, commodifiable object. Instead, it is an unfolding process of relationship-building, negotiation, memory-sharing, and mutual care.

This approach positions community art not as a linear project with fixed goals, but as an ongoing cultural process that shifts according to the lived experiences and needs of its participants. In this way, the value lies in the doing, not just in the documentation. A workshop where elders teach children a disappearing dance form, or a neighborhood clean-up that evolves into a creative mapping project, may never be officially recognized as "art," yet these acts form the cultural lifeblood of Nang Loeng.

Such process-oriented work resists the extractive logic often seen in externally driven art initiatives, where communities are asked to take part for a temporary moment only to be left behind once the project ends. E-Lerng's commitment to iterative co-creation allows culture to emerge organically, slowly, and meaningfully. It is a shift from art as spectacle to art as sustenance.

This paradigm has profound implications for policy. It suggests that funding cycles and evaluative criteria must be reimagined—not to reward outcomes, but to nurture processes. Supporting the cultural process means supporting the rhythm of the community, even when the outcomes are intangible or unmeasurable. For E-Lerng, the process is the product.

Lessons for Global Community Art Policy in the Absence of National Art Councils

The E-Lerng Artists Collective was born in Thailand—a country where no national art council exists, where cultural policy is fragmented at best, and where community art remains unsupported in structural terms. In this context, the group's 17-year survival is not merely a story of artistic persistence but a living critique of centralized, top-down policy models.

E-Lerng's continued relevance was not guaranteed by institutional scaffolding. There was no government funding pipeline, no grants earmarked for community art, and no formal policy environment that encouraged long-term cultural initiatives. In fact, the group operated in a vacuum space where formal structures failed to recognize the social and civic value of participatory art. That vacuum, however, became fertile ground for an alternative model to emerge model of decentralized, autonomous, and community-led cultural infrastructure.

Instead of looking upward for validation or resources, E-Lerng turned inward and outward: inward, toward the people of Nang Loeng—its elders, youth, artisans, and everyday citizens—and outward, toward intersectoral collaborations with NGOs, academic institutions, and international partners. This constellation of relational support substituted for missing formal policy and proved more adaptive than any rigid bureaucratic mechanism could have been.

Through shared leadership, co-creation, and data-informed adaptation, the collective cultivated a living policy by practice, where decisions were made by those most affected by them. Community art, in this case, did not wait for permission; it evolved on its own terms. The resulting ecosystem is not only artistically rich but politically instructive. It teaches us that the absence of a national cultural policy does not equate to the absence of cultural agency—if that agency is claimed from below.

For countries in the Global South—or anywhere cultural infrastructure is lacking—this lesson is invaluable. Policy does not always have to precede practice. Sometimes, practice can prefigure policy. And sometimes, the most durable models are those not imposed, but grown.

Implications for Global Community Art Policy

Though E-Lerng emerged from the specific cultural and political terrain of Thailand—where national art councils are absent and public funding for the arts is sparse—its lessons resonate far beyond local borders. In an era increasingly attuned to the role of culture in sustainability, urban resilience, and democratic renewal, the collective's story challenges conventional wisdom about how community art should be supported and sustained globally.

Most cultural policies still follow a vertical model: funding flows from centralized authorities to artists, who are tasked with delivering predefined, measurable outcomes. In such frameworks, "community" is often reduced to an audience or beneficiary—rarely a collaborator. E-Lerng reverses this logic. It operates from the bottom up, strengthening the social systems that generate art, rather than funding art in isolation. It values the slow cultivation of relationships over the quick production of outcomes, and shifts the emphasis from spectacle to sustainability, from consumption to co-creation.

This inversion offers far-reaching implications. It suggests a model of horizontal governance, where artists, communities, and civic actors co-design not only the content of cultural work, but also the structures of support behind it. It urges institutions to treat cultural work not as a series of deliverables, but as a long-term investment in social ecosystems. And it insists that cultural labor—especially when rooted in place—be recognized not as a service, but as a form of care, reciprocity, and lived engagement.

For nations with robust arts funding mechanisms, E-Lerng does not replace existing models—but rather offers a critical lens through which to reassess them. It reminds policymakers that distributing resources is not enough; cultivating ecosystems of trust, learning, and continuity is equally vital. For countries where no formal arts policy exists, E-Lerng offers a roadmap: community art can grow in the cracks of state absence, but when it does, it reveals the very architecture that policy itself ought to support.

E-Lerng teaches us that cultural policy does not always begin with legislation. Sometimes, it begins with action. With a group of people who dare to believe that art can be a form of governance, a platform for care, and a space for imagining otherwise. They have not waited for systems to change. They have become the system. And in doing so, they offer the world not just a theory—but a future.

Tracing from Within: Methodology and Approach

Knowledge in this work arises from embedded experience—years of living, creating, and negotiating alongside the E-Lerng since its founding. As a co-founder and active member, I have taken part in every phase of the group's evolution: from shaping its earliest projects to co-devising strategies for survival in moments of crisis. What follows is not a detached account, but a perspective formed through long-term engagement, where analytic insight grows from within the everyday practices of collaboration, care, and collective authorship.

Multiple forms of documentation support this inquiry. Internal archives offer a record of intentions, decisions, and adaptations. Public materials from exhibitions and programs reveal how the collective positioned itself within broader cultural conversations. Posters, media articles, and digital artifacts contribute to a parallel narrative: one of public perception, reception, and dialogue.

Ethical considerations remain central. Information derived from personal encounters or community memory has been overseen with care. Identities are anonymized where necessary, and materials were used only with consent or when already publicly available. No formal interviews or interventions were conducted, as the aim was not to extract data but to reflect with integrity on lived participation.

Rather than seeking distance, this approach centers proximity. It values intimacy with context as a source of depth. In environments where formal research often arrives late and leaves early, working from within offers not only access, but accountability. The community is not a subject of study, it is the condition of knowing. Artistic labor, informal systems of support, and everyday acts of cultural stewardship form both the method and the matter of this work.

Charting a New Paradigm for Community Art Policy

The story of the E-Lerng Artists Collective is not merely one of survival, but of quiet revolution. In a nation lacking a national arts council, coherent cultural policy, or long-term governmental support, E-Lerng has charted an independent course—growing not through formal structures, but through trust, embedded relationships, and a radical commitment to local knowledge. Over seventeen years, the collective has not only created artworks, but built a living ecosystem of care, mutual aid, and creative agency.

By proposing the theory of Community Art as Decentralized Social Infrastructure, this article reframes how we understand sustainability in community art. Art is no longer the output of policy but the infrastructure itself—a web of relationships, memory, participation, and resilience that supports daily life. E-Lerng did not wait for permission to begin; they became the system that others might now learn from.

This framework has global implications. It invites cultural policymakers, artists, and community organizers to shift their gaze: from products to processes, from outcomes to ecosystems, from top-down grants to bottom-up governance. In regions where formal support

is absent, the E-Lerng model shows that culture can still flourish—if it is grounded in people, place, and purpose.

E-Lerng offers us more than a theory. It offers a roadmap, a challenge, and a promise. It reminds us that when art lives in the hearts of communities, it needs no council to validate it. It becomes the ground we stand on, the stories we inherit, and the future we dare to build together.

References

Johnson, M. (2018). Cultural participation and community cohesion. Journal of Community Development, 49(2), 214–230.

Matarasso, F. (1997). Use or ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts. Comedia. pp. 7, 40–42.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. Journal of Democracy 6 (1): 65–78.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community. New York: Simon & Schuster. 544 pp. Key concept of social capital defined on page 19.

Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses, pp. 1–15. Cambridge University Press.