

Dharavi Biennale



In 2012 the International Engagement Awards supported a project based in the informal settlement of Dharavi in Mumbai, India, one of the largest 'slums' in the world. The project gives the local community an opportunity to engage with relevant health issues through a series of art projects, culminating in the 2015 [Dharavi Biennale](#). This work grew out of a successful small award and received £130,000 over three years.

The project

The *Dharavi Biennale*, a vibrant art and health festival with a series of standalone workshops, is the sequel to the smaller community art project [Dekha Undekha](#) (Seen Unseen). The theme of the project is recycling, using artworks made from recycled materials to address the health implications of recycled behaviours.

By bringing together multimedia work in an exhibition, the *Biennale* aims to demonstrate how art practice can contribute to health improvement in vulnerable communities. After all, health improvement involves efforts that only begin when people get talking – and art is a powerful talking point.

The partnerships

The Biennale and its predecessor emerged from a partnership between Dr David Osrin, a Wellcome Trust Fellow at University College London, and the NGO [SNEHA](#) (Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action). This relationship helps to create stronger ties with the local community and builds on SNEHA's well-established work in Dharavi, especially with women and children.

Collaborations between local artists, researchers and the community further strengthen the project. These

partnerships, between groups unlikely to have collaborated otherwise, ensure that the subject matter is relevant to those involved, reflecting their concerns as well as exploring issues in contemporary global health research.

The project inspires creative exchange based on the principle that all participants have their own expertise: scientists know about science, health workers know about health, and Dharavi residents know about living in informal settlements.

The strengths

The aim here is not health promotion, but development of dialogue about urban health through creative exploration. This includes discussions about health issues that could contribute to changes in community health, such as improved childhood diets or public debate about violence against women and children.

At the core of the project is the desire to give local artists the opportunity to consolidate their skills and work toward sustainability, building capacity by nurturing practical and leadership skills and offering sub-grants over the project cycle to help emerging artists develop their own activities.

Hosting the exhibition in the centre of the community means that it engages audiences that are diverse and difficult to reach, from people who would not usually go to an exhibition to people who would not usually enter Dharavi.

Embedding the project in this way also allows it to instil pride within a vulnerable community, giving Dharavi a place on the map associated with creativity rather than sympathy. It also acknowledges the huge contribution of urban slum dwellers to India's economic and cultural life.