

<https://www.theguardian.com/social-enterprise-network/2014/mar/21/circus-social-enterprise-developing-world>

How social enterprise circuses are impacting on disadvantaged youths

Social enterprises across the world are using circus tricks and tips to help disadvantaged youths, educate communities and improve the areas in which they exist

Rich McEachran

First published on Fri 21 Mar 2014



Social enterprises have found that circus skills can help those in developing countries and at home. Photograph: Bertil Nilsson For The National Centre For Circus Arts

Teachers often tell students to stop 'clowning around' but many social enterprises are doing the very opposite. Across the world, circus workshops are replacing lessons and demonstrating that laughter is the best medicine.

Circuses are using workshops to educate communities on issues such as HIV, female genital mutilation and land mines. In South Africa, [Zip Zap Circus School](#) caters for vulnerable and homeless youths and [Phare](#) the Cambodian Circus is a popular tourist attraction that, among other things, promotes aspiring, young artists and performers.

There are social enterprise circuses operating in the UK too. [Circus Space](#), based at a former power station in London, [Greentop](#), in Sheffield, and [Organised Kaos](#), in the valleys of South Wales, are just a few.

Regardless of geographical location these circuses are all connected by their passion to change young people's lives and inspire social and economic development.

"The beauty of the circus arts is that it gives marginalised youth, who are more likely to have low confidence, an opportunity to perform. Circus allows them to hide behind the prop and perform without being judged" explains Jay Che, founder of [Circus in Motion](#) in Singapore.

Circus in Motion has had much success delivering workshops for low achievers at school and children with mental disabilities. The organisation, which was recently named as one of Singapore's youth enterprises of 2013, have also worked with young offenders. Che, who previously worked with [Cirque du Monde](#) - the social arm of Cirque du Soleil - recognises circus training's potential to be a tool that can push those who misbehave and reward those who show promise.

The rewards are plenty. "Circus skills can be used to teach life skills, including perseverance, teamwork, trust and positive risk-taking," says Che. Young people can apply these life skills outside of the circus – which can help make them more employable and taking part in workshops can give a sense of self-worth while boosting their confidence.

For vulnerable young people, especially those who have experienced conflict or trauma, the circus can be a form of escape, and a place where they share their experiences and express their emotions.

"Clowning provokes feelings of empathy among both the participants and the audience," explains Diana Calvo, co-founder of [Outa Hamra](#). The Egyptian clowning theatre group that blends circus skills with street drama is part of the [Nahdet el Mahrousa](#), an incubator for innovative social enterprises across the Middle East. They too provide workshops and teach disadvantaged youth a trick or two.

Calvo says clowning around and performing circus tricks on streets brings local communities together and starts a conversation on social and political issues.

"I remember once, when a group of street children performed in front of members of the government and afterwards the children were asked questions. It must have been the first time they'd been spoken to on an equal level ... it's a powerful message."

Messages are a cardinal part of these circuses. Each act or skill comes attached with its own deeper, symbolic meaning. Tightrope walking could represent an escape from conflict or trauma. While other acrobatic acts may reflect a seemingly impossible goal being achieved, which for most young people participating in the workshops is finding a job and being successful.

It's not just new-found confidence and future job opportunities that these social circuses are creating; it's a support network that meets both the educational and psychological needs of the wider community.

A circus with a purpose has an impact long after the young people have completed their workshops or successfully graduated. By being socially conscious, these enterprises recognise the role they can play in providing long-term stability, ensuring that social and economic development flourishes and continuing to inspire young people.

"We use everyday objects as props. We wear clothes from flea markets," gushes Calvo. "We want to deliver the message that anyone can do what we do."