

REPORTS

## Current Practices and Considerations for International Development Music Therapy: A World Federation of Music Therapy Scoping Project

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### Executive Summary

The World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT) Research and Ethics Commission conducted a scoping project to gather information about music therapy practices in international development contexts. Seventeen music therapists with experience in international development projects (out of 55 approached) responded to 14 questions about their work. Their responses indicated that work is generally short-medium term project work, often with follow up visits or online contact when possible to support sustainability. Work is commonly in the areas of disability or with refugees/displaced persons and often has a strong skills-sharing component to support ongoing project impact.

Respondents identified a list of important practical and theoretical ethical considerations that are particular to this kind of work. For example, the need for a sustainable orientation and a collaborative approach that engages with the community's values and culture. There was also strong recognition of the need to be reflexive and responsive to the community; to be aware of post-colonialism and to not impose foreign values and practices onto communities.

This scoping project has identified a need for an integrated global dialogue between music therapists involved in international development work. Such a dialogue could be a platform for practitioners to connect, explore, and reflect collaboratively on the ethical and practical challenges of this unique approach to practice.

This scoping project is an information gathering exercise that is ongoing. We invite any music therapist or music therapy student who is engaged in international development work to contact the first author ([bolgerl@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:bolgerl@unimelb.edu.au)) to express your interest and participate in the short email questionnaire. In particular, we would like to include more perspectives from:

- Music therapists whose first language is not English
- Music therapists from universities sending students on international development placements

- Music therapists pioneering practices in countries where music therapy is not yet an established profession.

**Keywords:** *international development, sustainability, economies, music therapy*

## Summary of Findings

The aim of this scoping project was to gather information about programs and projects where music therapists travel internationally to countries and communities where music therapy is not yet well established to offer project-based music therapy input. This often involves music therapists from developed economies travelling to countries with developing economies or economies in transition, or places where there has been a humanitarian or environmental crisis. While many terms may be used to describe this area of music therapy practice, the term *international development* is employed in this report. The scoping project aimed to build an overall picture of the practices undertaken by music therapists working in international development around the world.

The project was conceived in response to a request for more information from WFMT leadership following a member ethics enquiry about this emerging area of practice. The Commissioner (Author 2) and a commission member (Author 1) agreed that gathering information was a critical first step in understanding the area of international development. The scoping project was then spearheaded by Author 1, who has over 10 years of experience working in music therapy and international development. It is the understanding of the authors that this is the first WFMT scoping study to build knowledge about music therapists' experiences in this area of practice.

Participants were identified using professional contacts and recommendations through music therapy networks. Fifty-five music therapists globally were contacted via email and invited to answer a series of 14 questions about their work in international development. Seventeen respondents completed the questions. Respondents identified as living in 10 different home countries: UK (8), Europe (2), Asia Pacific (5), North America (1), Middle East (1), and had been involved in work in 14 different host countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East.

The international music therapy projects described were generally sponsored by one or more international organisations, in collaboration with local organisation/s or community program/s in-country who worked with music therapists during their visit. A small number of respondents described their music projects as ongoing, with regular, coordinated involvement by the music therapist. However, the most common project structure described by music therapists were short-medium term music therapy projects that were finite in duration (from 2 weeks to 2-3 years) within an ongoing local community project/program. Some music therapists remained in ongoing intermittent contact with their host communities to provide consultative support post-project. This was described as often dependent on time and funding availability.

This scoping project identified two major areas of focus in international development music therapy work: work with people with disabilities and their supporting communities and work with communities of refugees and/or people who have been displaced. Work with women and youth was also described. Several respondents articulated an advocacy element to their work. Alongside direct impact for communities, projects sought to raise awareness and give voice to the experiences of these communities.

Projects varied in structure. Music therapists described drawing on a wide variety of established Western music therapy theory, and many emphasised a focus on improvisational methods. Some respondents described traditional music therapist-run sessions wherein the music therapist sought to adapt to the music, activities and location to the context and culture of the project. Skills sharing and staff training were a focus of most programs, recognising a need to build the capacity and resources of local program staff who would remain after the music project was over. In some cases, music therapists

described supporting local staff to pursue formal advanced qualifications, including masters and graduate diploma-level studies and blended learning online skills training.

Most respondents articulated that fixed-term music therapy input in isolation is not appropriate when engaging with communities as a foreign visitor. Sustainability measures were identified by many music therapists as a high priority. For the purposes of this report, *sustainability measures* refer to aspects of a music therapy project intended to offer continued benefit or support to communities beyond the scope of a fixed-term project. These were approached in a variety of ways:

- Skills sharing and staff training in therapeutic music and leadership skills
- Co-facilitation of music therapy sessions
- Return visits and online support post-project
- Informal modelling of music therapy strategies during sessions
- Formal advanced training opportunities for local staff
- Reciprocal travel by local staff to visit music therapists in their home country.

In addition, all respondents reflected in different ways on the need to be mindful of the ethical complexities associated with this work. There are post-colonial dilemmas associated with all international development work, and respondents articulated a strong need to be responsive to context and aware of the assumptions, values, and biases they brought as foreign visitors. They reflected on the need to be non-defensive about how music and music therapy may be used and received and open to working in new, culturally responsive ways. Respondents recognised that it can be a challenge to let go of closely held beliefs about the professional identity and role of a music therapist, even when that is not appropriate for the context. They articulated a critical need for supervision and personal reflection, and some recognised that knowledge about international development and post-colonial theory would be helpful prior to travel. Authors note that these are often not included in music therapy training.

This scoping study revealed that there are a number of complex ethical considerations associated with international development music therapy work, on practical and theoretical levels. For example, at a practical level, music therapists recognised a need for:

- Understanding political structures and conflicts at play
- Consideration of how to gain informed consent and portray people with respect
- Time to build relationships, observe, and listen to people
- Understanding of the existing ways music is used and understood, and how medicine, health, and disability are conceptualised
- Recognition that the roles of different genders may vary in different environments
- Appropriate attire and behaviour
- Considering the resources and equipment that is available when designing activities
- Mindfulness about religious holidays and remembrance days
- Recognition that language is nuanced, and there is potential for misunderstanding.

At a theoretical level, music therapists identified a need for:

- A sustainable orientation – to consider what will happen when they have left
- Genuine, engaged collaboration with communities and taking the time to build this
- Developing long-term relationships in feasible ways
- Universal positive regard
- Self-awareness of one's own biases, values and culture and how they are impacting the project
- An *exchange* approach rather than a *help* approach.

Further, music therapists identified a need to consider:

- The power dynamics and imbalances at play
- The privilege one lives with and brings to a project
- Cultural respect rather than cultural appropriation and how to foster this
- Issues of decolonisation and intersectionality.

### **Recommendations and Further Action**

It is evident that there are many challenging ethical considerations associated with this work and that the music therapists who responded to our invitation to participate are engaging individually with this complexity, as reflected in their responses. Given the diverse inter- and multi-cultural nature of international development music therapy practice, it is inappropriate to pre-determine a set of global best practices for this work. However, it is clear that an engaged and inclusive ongoing global dialogue between music therapists involved in this area of practice would be of great value. This dialogue may consider practical issues, ethical challenges, critical perspectives, even the language used to describe this work – to name just a few possibilities arising from this report. Such a dialogue could connect music therapists engaging with this work, foster critical reflexivity and collegiate support, and cultivate a practice-led theoretical discourse to inform emerging music therapy practice in international development.

This report is an early step in documenting the perspectives and practices of music therapists engaging in international development work. The aim of this report is to document current practices and offer a shared basis for further global discussion. It is an information gathering exercise, rather than a research project, and for this reason authors have refrained from offering interpretation or linking this report to literature. As this global discussion about music therapy's role in international development context continues to evolve, music therapists are encouraged to use this report in conjunction with the growing academic discourse on this topic.